

**A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES  
OF PREGNANT AND MOTHERING TEENS**

A Dissertation

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Since the 1970s, teen pregnancy has been strategically placed at the forefront of American minds. Much attention, research, and funding is dedicated to teen pregnancy prevention and abstinence-only education, yet as many as one million teens still become pregnant each year. There are substantial life consequences for teens that become pregnant and choose to keep their children, and the majority of existing research would lead people to believe that all of these consequences are negative in nature, even though many young women who become parents while in high school continue to thrive.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens who graduated from high school on academically rigorous, college preparatory curriculum programs. Specifically, this study took an in-depth look at the educational experiences of five female students who were pregnant and/or mothering when they graduated from a Texas high school on one of two optional curricular tracks—the Recommended High School Program and the Distinguished Achievement Program—that promote college readiness.

This qualitative study included individual, semi-structured interviews and focus group meetings to give these teens a voice and to create rich, thick descriptions for educators to understand what enables some pregnant and mothering teens to be successful in high school. The participants for this study were randomly selected from a purposive sample at one suburban high school. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, and rich, thick description. The

transcribed interviews and focus group meetings were categorized to establish patterns and themes in the data.

Four major themes emerged from the data. In describing how they were able to successfully complete high school on academically rigorous plans, the study participants pointed to the importance of school relationships, including with peers, teachers, staff, and administration; the value of formal and informal in-school and out-of-school support systems; the need for balance, whether between school and motherhood or between their pregnant bodies and the limitations of their school's physical environment; and the role of motivation and long range plans in their persistence. Ultimately, the teen mothers who participated in this study derived resiliency from these key assets and resources, and this resiliency enabled them to succeed.

Even though the five participants in this study all had unique stories, they were all able to successfully graduate from high school on rigorous programs, while others do not. The young women in this study all made it very clear that mothering empowered them. Contrary to what many believe, they did not succeed in high school in spite of their status as pregnant and mothering teens; they did so because of it.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate my dissertation to my parents, Karen and Steve Gregg. Their love, support, and guidance have brought me this far. They have believed in me when I have failed to believe in myself. They challenged me to take “just one class” to see if I liked it, knowing it would lead to the entire degree. They inspire me to always finish what I have started, and lead by example, demanding the best at all times. They raised two capable independent children. I am so very blessed to have my parents in my life.

To my sons, Oliver and Owen. I will finish because of you and for you. Like the women in my study so eloquently put it, “I am finishing because of my child.” You are the bright spot in every day. I am so blessed that God brought you into my life and kept me here to watch you grow. You are my greatest accomplishments and the fuel for all of my days.

And I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother. She was a single, teenage mom in 1945. She stood up to the pressures to give up my aunt or get married. From her, I learned that you can be strong and make your own path. She always believed in me, and I miss her humorous spirit. She taught me to believe in myself, to be fiercely independent, and that it was okay to march to my own beat.

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I thank all of these women for making the dissertation process such a wonderful experience. Their guidance and patience has been priceless.

I would like to thank my participants. Without you, none of this would be possible. You believed in me, you believed in my research, and you believe in yourselves. I stand in awe of you. I cannot imagine the enormity of having a child or being pregnant while in high school. You all have enormous strength. You don't settle for good enough; you persevere and make your own way.

I would also like to thank all of my teachers and professors over the years. I have had good teachers and I have had bad teachers. The bad teachers taught me to appreciate the good ones. The good teachers taught me to know when I have a bad teacher. They have helped me to be a good teacher.

Thank you to my students. Thank you for helping me to be a better person. Thank you for always believing in me. Thank you for monitoring my progress and encouraging me to finish. Thank you to my students for allowing me to teach you and be a part of your lives.

Thank you to my husband. As I put the finishing touches on this paper, he is bouncing our ten month old teething son who desperately wants to nurse.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the first two months of the 2012–2013 school year, I had one student give birth, one student have an abortion, and another student give birth and subsequently drop out of school. All three were among the 125 students, both male and female, who were in my fourth-year science courses that year. By February of 2013, I had two more students who were pregnant and expecting to deliver and keep their babies. Therefore, in my classes alone, the count was five of the 125 total students who were or had been pregnant during the school year, and I had two additional students who were mothers, for a total of seven students who were pregnant or mothering teens. Given the public rhetoric on pregnant and mothering teens, one might be inclined to believe that I was teaching a class that was compulsory or at a lower academic level. However, that was not the case.

I teach forensic science, a course that requires students to have taken chemistry and to be on the Recommended High School Program—a rigorous route to graduation that requires students to complete four science courses. Thus, the students on the Recommended plan are some of the top students in the school. In order for these pregnant and mothering teens to complete high school on the Recommended plan, they had to be academically responsible. They had to demonstrate proficiency by successfully completing four courses in each of four core areas: math, science, English, and social studies. Moreover, most of the students in my forensic science course

planned to attend college. In short due to social construction, while one might think that a teen mother or pregnant teen is irresponsible, promiscuous, and deviant, the mothers and pregnant teens in this study were at the top of their class, academically responsible, and college bound.

During my teaching tenure, my interest in teen pregnancy has been piqued. Every year I have had at least one student in my class who is pregnant or who is a mother. For most of my teaching career I had not myself experienced being pregnant or becoming a mother, so I had no phenomenological knowledge of what it was like. I previously had no personal knowledge that I could draw on to help these students, other than the teaching methods I had been trained in—trainings that were supposedly designed to address the needs of all students. When I encountered my first student who was a mother, I had four years of teaching experience and I knew the importance of building relationships with my students in order to foster their learning experience.

My first experience teaching a mothering teen was eleven years ago. At the time, I was teaching eighth grade science in a middle school. Rene was 15 years old and had just given birth to her second child. The father of her children had recently been charged with and jailed for statutory rape due to their significant age difference—approximately 10 years. Rene's own father was blind, deaf, and mute. She and her children had been removed from her father's custody due to his inability to supervise her, which had enabled the involvement with this older man. Rene and her children had been placed together into foster care to ensure their security.

Throughout the school year I spoke with Rene and tried to build a relationship with her. Through these conversations, I realized that she had needs that far exceeded my training. When I had Rene in class, I had only been teaching for three years—two years in fifth grade and one year in sixth grade. Later in my career, when I began teaching higher grade levels and therefore older students, I began encountering more pregnant and mothering teens. Thus, from my early experiences teaching Rene, along with later experiences teaching older students, I realized pregnant and mothering teens face unique challenges and therefore have unique educational needs. While there is some research that addresses these challenges and needs, there is scant literature addressing these issues from the perspectives of the students themselves.

As a teacher, I have watched my students struggle to balance school with pregnancy and motherhood. Yet there are few resources for teachers who are teaching these young women. I hear the comments that teachers make about pregnant and mothering teens. I also hear how the students believe they are being treated. These young women are seemingly beset on all sides with different trials. As a woman, I cannot imagine how many mixed emotions run through their minds; one can only assume they start to feel overwhelmed. As a teacher, I cannot imagine how difficult it is to balance being a mother and a high school student. And, as a student, I cannot imagine how hard it is completing tasks and balancing priorities, and how much this balancing act complicates their lives.

My experience with my own pregnancy in the high school environment has given me additional insight. As a first-time expectant mother, I walked through my school

scared of the germs. I worried I would be run into or run over, and I was constantly on the lookout for the next fight. I wondered when the bell would ring for a restroom break. In short, I constantly worried about the safety of my unborn baby. I wondered if my students felt similar anxieties.

I have sought out research that would help me address the needs of my pregnant and mothering students. An abundance of research can be found on the negative effects of teen pregnancy, how to prevent teen pregnancy, sex education, abstinence education, and programs designed to help teen mothers. However, it is hard to find research that examines the experiences of pregnant and mothering teens within public high schools. In short, I found I had few resources that would help me learn how best to address the needs of these students. I was trying to be supportive, but I did not have research-based resources to use.

As teachers, we seek to add value to the lives of our students through their education. As a future leader in education, I feel that teachers need research and knowledge concerning what pregnant or mothering teens experience in public education to better prepare them to teach these young women. Teachers are trained in how to deal with many different types of students, and we are trained to meet the needs of most students. However, we do not have research-based training that addresses the needs of pregnant and mothering teens. Thus, it is my hope that this study will be one piece in the research puzzle.

My goal for this research is to provide insight into the experiences of pregnant and mothering teens in a public high school setting from their perspective. In turn, this

research may serve as a resource for school leaders to help educate teachers about the experiences of pregnant and mothering teens within the public high school system. In the end it is my hope that the findings from this research will enhance the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens.

### **Literature Review**

The literature associated with pregnant and mothering teens, discussed in detail in Chapter II and summarized here, covers several overlapping areas. First, I explore how teen pregnancy is socially constructed and how this directly impacts the politics and policies of teen pregnancy. I then review how these politics and policies have led to the agenda of teen pregnancy prevention. This sets the stage for an examination of the literature about teen pregnancy, including a discussion of feminism. Collectively, these categories encompass many of the current trends in research on teen pregnancy and motherhood.

The image of teen pregnancy—constructed by our society, in large part by the media—portrays it as a social problem (Tapia, 2005). Many media campaigns are targeted at preventing teen pregnancy, specifically minority teen pregnancy, and this fuels the perception that it is a problem (Tapia, 2005). Perceptions about teen pregnancy are also influenced by the idea that teens are children (Murcott, 1980). In fact, society did not recognize an adolescent or teen stage of life until the late 1800s—prior to that, people were categorized as either child or adult. Not only was this stage of life not recognized until more recent times, the adolescent or teen years were considered the best time to bear children due to the physiology of the female body (Wilson & Huntington,

2005). Throughout recent history, society has changed its views on teen pregnancy and the appropriate age to have children. As society constructs (and reconstructs) its views of teen pregnancy and mothering, it also brings teen pregnancy into the political arena.

The social construction of teen pregnancy greatly influences how it is brought into politics. Presidents Kennedy, Nixon, and Johnson all saw high fertility rates among women as a social problem to be addressed (Luker, 1996). Thus, pregnancy became a political issue. Indeed, teen pregnancy emerged as an official social problem in 1975 (Luker, 1996), and, as such, it gained political attention. During the 1980s, the media began to portray it as a growing social problem, and we were led to believe that teen pregnancy rates were increasing. However, in this era, teen pregnancy rates actually decreased (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 1989).

This misperception increased pressure on governmental entities to find solutions. Teen pregnancy, along with women's rights issues, came to the political forefront, and Title IX was passed in 1988. Title IX mandates equal opportunities for all women in the public education system. Pregnant and mothering teens are guaranteed an education in the public school setting through this legislation, and thus it serves to protect their educational rights (Luttrell, 2003, 2014). Even though politics have helped to preserve these rights, society's goal has remained the prevention teen pregnancy, rather than the enhancement of the educational experiences of pregnant or mothering teens.

According to Fields (2008), the political and social context casts young people's sexuality as a problem to solve, delay, or mute. The most popular trend is to teach abstinence-only within the public education setting, and the U.S. government provides a



significant amount of funding to schools that participate in abstinence-only education, but only if they teach *solely* abstinence (Pillow, 2004). Abstinence-only programs send clear messages to young women that they must deny their bodies and invest heavily in their minds (Burns & Torre, 2005). Such programs do not address the sexuality of teens, nor do they address teen pregnancy. Abstinence-only education has been pushed so heavily in the education system because of the perception that teen pregnancy is a social problem (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998).

One in four American women will become pregnant during her teen years, and pregnant and mothering teens cite their pregnancies and parenting as their number one reason for dropping out of high school (Scholl, 2007). Thus, we are at risk of losing one of every four American women from our educational system. As many as 20% of these pregnant teens will have become pregnant within one month of their first sexual experience (Immell, 2001). Once these teens become pregnant, Roles (1989) has identified four main options for them: marriage, adoption, keeping the baby, and abortion. These four options are daunting for anyone, especially teenagers. Being faced with difficult choices is just one of the hurdles for pregnant teens in high school.

Many aspects of teen pregnancy have been researched, but the literature is dominated by studies that examine its negative consequences (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). There are exceptions, however. Dellano, Kaye, and Philliber (1999) researched parenting programs available in high schools; Scholl (2007) researched the policies and programs that school administrators can put into place for pregnant and mothering students; the beliefs of teen parents regarding literacy programs have been explored by

Neuman, Hagedorn, Celano, and Daly (1995). Then, there are a host of books that were written for teen mothers to guide them through important decision making processes (Endrsbe, 2000; Immell, 2001; Roles, 1989).

In sum, research on pregnant and mothering teens has been varied in its purpose, with the vast majority of studies seeking ways to prevent teen pregnancy. Studies exist to tell of the ill effects of teen pregnancy, and there is research about parenting programs and particular policies. There is a gap in the research, however, concerning the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens from their own perspectives. The current study seeks to fill that gap.

### **Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study**

We currently know little about the perceptions of pregnant and mothering teens who graduate from high school, especially those who do so on a curriculum plan that makes them eligible for college. Until we examine their experiences, their needs will not be assessed and likely will not be met. Therefore, this research sought to capture the educational experiences of this specific group of pregnant and mothering teens and, in doing so, give them a voice.

By understanding the educational experiences and needs of pregnant and mothering teens, we can provide insight for educators, which can then facilitate a better educational experience for these students. Moreover, pregnant and mothering teens need advocates who are educational leaders (Scholl, 2007). This research seeks to answer that call. With all of this in mind, the question that guided this study is: *What are the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens in the public high school*

*setting who graduate on the Recommended High School or Distinguished Achievement Program?*

### **Methods**

This was a qualitative study. According to Creswell (2003), the use of multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic constitutes qualitative research. Participants were pregnant or mothering teens who were 18 years old or older. All were either current public high school students or had recently completed high school. This qualitative approach sought to empower the participants and to enable them to share their stories. As such, the study followed Creswell's (2007) qualifications for qualitative research.

I used purposive sampling to locate five study participants. Purposive sampling occurs when the researcher selects individuals and locations for a study because they can purposively inform an understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2007). The individuals needed for this study were pregnant and mothering teens within a public high school setting. I established initial contact with one pregnant or mothering teen, and she was asked to bring in additional participants who met the criteria; they were then invited to join the study. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) defined this snowball or chain method as "cases that are recommended by individuals who know other individuals likely to yield relevant, information-rich data" (p. 181).

I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each of the five participants—an initial interview and a follow up interview (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). In addition, two focus groups guided by predetermined questions engaged the teens in group discussions

about their educational experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and I took field notes to allow for further analysis (Bode, 1992; Luttrell, 2003). Throughout the gathering of the information I employed several measures to ensure trustworthiness of the data.

Trustworthiness is attained through corroboration of evidence from multiple data sources (Merriam, 1988). To this end, I utilized four strategies: triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, and rich, thick description. Triangulation of data came from the use of multiple perceptions to clarify meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Ongoing discussions with my dissertation chair and peers provided an external check of the research process (Creswell, 2007). I used member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure that I fully understood each participant and properly conveyed her story. The final strategy was the use of thick and rich description, which allows readers to make their own decisions on the transferability of the study findings (Creswell, 2007).

Combined, these research methods and interpretations gave the pregnant and mothering teens a voice. By giving these students the opportunity to share their insights, I hope that educators can better understand their educational experiences and better provide a learning environment that specifically addresses their educational needs.

### **Summary of the Dissertation**

Pregnant and mothering teens are a reality in the public education system. They attend schools around the country. Many are exceptional students, taking rigorous courses, and they are on the path to college or other career options. During my teaching tenure, I have encountered numerous examples of the deficits in teacher preparation for

teaching pregnant and mothering teens. I have not felt as though I have had the necessary tools to successfully teach these students, and a review of the literature reveals insufficient sources designed to inform teachers in similar positions.

The goal of this research, then, was to provide pregnant and mothering teens a voice through which teachers and administrators can better understand their needs, and thus provide them a better education. This study can provide teachers and educational leaders with much needed insight into their educational experiences; pregnant and mothering teens are given a voice, thereby providing educators the ability to craft a curriculum and an atmosphere that can give them a better educational experience. The experiences of pregnant and mothering teens within the public high school setting are examined throughout this dissertation. This chapter was dedicated to outlining the need for this research.

Chapter II is dedicated to a more detailed exploration of the extant research that examines the many different aspects of pregnant and mothering teens' lives. Literature abounds on the ill effects of becoming a teen mother. Readily available research as well as the statistics on pregnant and mothering teens will be explored. This should help to highlight the lack of information available on the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens from their perspective, thereby underscoring the need for the current study.

Chapter III outlines the methods of inquiry that were used to conduct the research, including the selection of participants and the overall research design. I also explore how the data were analyzed and the limitations of the study.

Chapter IV presents the data gathered in the study. Here I also introduce the study participants. In order to illuminate their perspectives and experiences, I share comments and quotes from their individual interviews and focus groups.

Finally, Chapter V summarizes the results derived from the study. This chapter also describes the implications of the study findings for policy, practice, and further research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter provides a review of the relevant literature related to the education of pregnant and mothering teens. I have divided the discussion into five interrelated categories: the social construction of teen pregnancy; the effects of this social construction on the politics and policies related to teen pregnancy; the implications of teen pregnancy and the resulting agenda of prevention; information on teen pregnancy and mothering; and feminism. These five categories encompass many of the current research trends on teen motherhood and pregnancy. These categories encompass several different fields of academia: education, health, sociology, and psychology. First, however, it is useful to provide general context for the rates of teen pregnancy in our society.

As many as 500,000 teenage girls will give birth and become parents each year and, of these teenage mothers, 25% will give birth to a second child within two years (Williams & Sadler, 2001). The National Vital Statistics Report for 2006 reports that from 2005 to 2006 there was a 3% increase in pregnancy rates for teens age 15 to 17—the first rate increase since 1991 (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2007). The highest rate of teen pregnancy per 1,000 females in this age group was 47.9 births for Hispanic females. Black females showed the highest rate increase, and had 36.1 births per 1,000 females. American Indian and Alaska Natives had a birth rate of 30.5 per 1,000 females, and White females in this age group gave birth at a rate of 11.8 per 1,000. The lowest

birth rate in this age group was 8.7 per 1,000 for Asian or Pacific Islander youth (Hamilton et al., 2007). Among females age 18–19, the birth rate in each demographic category triples (Hamilton et al., 2007).

### **Social Construction of Teen Pregnancy**

When someone mentions teen pregnancy, for most people an image of a teen mother comes to mind. Many of our views of pregnant and mothering teens are negatively constructed by society. Tapia (2005), for example, asserted that the socially constructed phenomenon of the teen pregnancy epidemic arose from the national economic and cultural anxieties of the 1970s. During the 1970s, society became worried about the number of unwed mothers and, in particular, how many teens were unwed mothers. Teen pregnancy had long been a norm; however, the majority of teens were married prior to giving birth. In the 1960s and 1970s an increasing number of unwed pregnant women opted to not get married (Furstenberg, 2007). Society became worried about who would be responsible for the women and children; therefore teen pregnancy rose to the forefront as a social ill.

According to Murcott (1980), our society considers teen pregnancy to be a social problem that is an intersection of two ideologies: reproduction and childhood. Murcott purposed that there is an urgent preoccupation with teen pregnancy because pregnant women are viewed as children, and are therefore not entitled to legitimate pregnancies. Moreover, she noted an assumption that teen pregnancy is a social problem, which leads society to need to fix it.



In general, motherhood in American society can be a contentious issue due to the fact that so many views on the subject exist (Rich, 1976). Rich asserted that the physical and psychological weight of responsibility on a woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens. She also asserted that women were designed to begin childbearing in their second decade of life so that youth, flexibility, and muscle tone could aid in the birthing process. Similarly, Wilson and Huntington (2005) noted that there was no formally labeled “adolescent” stage of life until the late 1800s and, until recently, the teenage years were considered the optimal time physiologically for childbirth.

Rich (1976) was writing in the 1970s. Women were paid less than men and there was a fear of women being in the work place; this led to legislation to control how much women and children could work. Historically, bearing a child out of wedlock violated property laws, because a woman and her child must legally belong to a man (Rich, 1976). Generationally speaking, these views are not that old, and many people probably still hold them. The need for someone to be responsible for these women and these children is another perceived ill effect of teen pregnancy.

Musick (1993) also identified and substantiated the ill effects of adolescent childbearing. Musick asserted that teen mothers and their children are likely to be poor and to stay poor. She pointed out that during the 1970s most adolescent teens were married, and today most teen mothers are and will remain single. This reinforces the social construct of pregnant and mothering teens as a financial burden on society. Likewise, Coley and Chase-Lansdale (1998) noted that consequences of early

parenthood include low educational achievement and poverty. Further complicating matters, many state pregnancy prevention campaigns—for example, in California—have been aimed at keeping minorities from becoming teen parents (Tapia, 2005). Campaigns like these give faces to teen pregnancy, often of minority teens, and usually females not males. Thus, the campaigns reinforce stereotypes about teen parents (Tapia, 2005).

In *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds*, Luttrell (2003) cited four discourses that have been used to explain why teens become pregnant. The first is the “wrong-girl” discourse, which asserts that teenage pregnancy is out of control and needs intervention. When White girls’ sexual activity outside of marriage increases, then teen pregnancy is seen as a problem. The second discourse is “wrong-society,” which identifies class inequities as at the root of the teen pregnancy problem. Specifically, Luttrell explained that teen pregnancy and parenting are seen as a problem because teen parents are poor. Third is “stigma-is-wrong,” which asserts a resistance to stereotypes, including being viewed as inadequate mothers; however, many girls indicated that their pregnancies have changed them for the better. In fact, Hurley (2000) found that large numbers of mothering teens believed that pregnancy had improved their lives, despite the fact that many of them parent alone, as single mothers, causing them to miss out on childhood. The fourth and final discourse is “wrong-family,” which identifies the issues with teen pregnancy as stemming from a welfare problem. The welfare problem of teen pregnancy addresses who is financially responsible for the teen and her child. Together, these four discourses outline many of the perceived social issues of teen pregnancy, which are then used to establish and maintain policies that affect teen pregnancy.

Yet another view on the social construction of pregnant and mothering teens comes from Wilson and Huntington (2005), who asserted that the teen mothers are not vilified due to the poor outcomes they face, but rather because they are rejecting the middle class norm of completing higher education and entering the workforce. The normative path is to pursue higher education, have a career, and then have a family. Teen mothers seem to reject this socially acceptable middle class schedule, leading them to be perceived as rule breakers and as outside of societal norms. The authors asserted that when young women are disadvantaged and impoverished, attempts to delay pregnancy may be counterproductive. In other words, these women will remain disadvantaged and impoverished their entire lives, even if they wait to have children, so there is no advantage to delay childbearing. Importantly, Wilson and Huntington called for the voices of teen mothers to have equal weight in the scientific debate and policy development surrounding teen pregnancy and mothering. They believed that teen mothers need to be actively involved in determining questions they think need to be asked and answered.

In sum, the image of pregnant and mothering teens has been constructed by society, and is a combination of several things. First, they are seen as children, and thus incapable of taking care of themselves. More precisely, because children are dependent upon adults for survival, pregnant and mothering teens are viewed as dependent on society for care and funding. Second, because various campaigns for teen pregnancy prevention have been aimed at minority females, they leave the impression that teen pregnancy is a minority issue that only affects girls. And third, by rejecting the middle

class timeline, these young women become rule breakers going against the norms of society. They are vilified for taking a path other than what is socially accepted. These young women are subject to receive mixed messages. Our society markets sexuality to teens and young women via clothing, hair, and make up. Then when they become sexually active and end up pregnant we punish them. In short, young women who become pregnant are made out to be rule-breaking children who are a burden upon society. Burdens, rule breakers, and children need policies and regulations to remedy the problem.

### **Politics of Teen Pregnancy**

In the second half of the twentieth century, many American presidents, such as Kennedy, Nixon, and Johnson, were committed to reducing fertility rates among women (Luker, 1996). All three of these presidents saw high fertility rates among young women as a social problem they needed to address (Luker, 1996). In fact, teen pregnancy was brought to the forefront as a social problem as of 1975 and, during the 1980s, the media, fueled by politics, began to portray teen pregnancy as a growing social problem. Society was led to believe that teen pregnancy rates were on the rise, even though they had actually decreased (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 1989).

### **Teenage Sexual Activity and Pregnancy**

According to Luker (1996), in the 1980s teen pregnancy became a national agenda item that portrayed teens as becoming pregnant in epidemic numbers. Luker also asserted that premarital sex was becoming more common among all teenagers, and indeed, sexual activity is now beginning at a younger age than it once did (Immell,

2001). Regardless of relative rises and falls in rates of teen pregnancy, the numbers of pregnant and mothering teens are sobering. Hurley (2000) recently asserted that 1 million American teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 become pregnant each year, noting that poverty, lack of parental guidance, involvement with adult males, sexual abuse, and the glamorization of sex in popular culture all affect teen pregnancy rates.

Immell (2001) examined some of the reasons teenage girls become pregnant. She asserted that many teens see older men as a way out of their current situation, and that often, teens who become pregnant are acting in a parental capacity to their younger siblings. A misconception about teen pregnancy is that pregnant or mothering teens are promiscuous. In research conducted by Bode (1992), a study participant asserted that she “depends on [her] children to give [her] love” (p. 112). Teenagers are often looking for acceptance and love, which could account for the rise in premarital sex, all in a political and social context that casts young people’s sexuality as a problem to solve, delay, or mute (Fields, 2008). The onset and frequency of sex among teenagers has changed over time, and as a society we are eroticizing teen girls (Luttrell, 2003). Thus, many perceptions of teen sexuality and teen pregnancy are reinforced by society.

### **The Placement of Blame**

Even though there are so many factors that influence and affect teen pregnancy, our society still places the majority of the blame and responsibility on the pregnant and mothering teens. Rarely do we see attacks on the glamorization of sex in popular culture. The roles of sexual abuse and of involvement with adult males have likewise

been substantially downplayed throughout the discussion of pregnant and mothering teens. As Luker (1996) noted:

Americans seem bent on making the lives of teenage parents and their children even harder than they already are. Society has failed teenage parents all along the line—they are people for whom the schools, the healthcare system, and the labor market have been painful and unrewarding places. Now, it seems, young parents are being assigned responsibility for society's failures.” (p. 193)

Children and teens learn from society around them. If society tells teen parents they are responsible for society's failures, they are likely play out these roles that society has projected upon them.

Teen mothers shoulder the entire burden of teen pregnancy and mothering, and they are also blamed for many of the perceived ills of society (Wilson & Huntington, 2005; Luttrell, 2014). In addition, pregnancy is viewed as a barrier to learning (Luttrell, 2003). Yet, as a society, we take little if any blame for our role in constructing and perpetuating these views. For example, we do not own how eroticized our media has become. As a society—and as consumers—we have yet to stand up to the eroticized views of teens. What's more, advertising campaigns are targeted at teen pregnancy prevention for minorities (Tapia, 2005), giving teen pregnancy an additional stigma of being raced. How can we, as a society, provide a childhood that is hypersexualized and fail to teach teens how to prevent pregnancy, and then expect them not to become pregnant?

Finally, as further evidence of misplaced blame, Houston, Texas, was home to a court case in which an adult male impregnated a 13-year-old girl. The defense attorney used a cultural defense to get the adult male freed from charges. Specifically, his lawyer argued that in his village in Mexico, the defendant was seen as married to the girl under common law, and therefore he was not guilty of rape (Perales, 1999). Thus, not only are pregnant and mothering teens marginalized at school, they are also marginalized by our court system. Perales further asserted that the mother was seen as a second rate citizen and was not protected by our society.

### **Pregnant and Mothering Teens in Schools**

In the 1980s, as teen pregnancy came to be seen as a national problem, government entities began to seek solutions. In 1988, Title IX was passed (Luttrell, 2003); this legislation affects women as a whole and affords equal opportunities for pregnant and mothering teens. Title IX mandates equal opportunities for all women in the public education system. It is well known for regulating equality in sports, yet it also has important mandates for pregnant and mothering teens.

Until 1988, it was legal for schools to remove pregnant and mothering teens from the regular education system, and many dropped out or moved to alternative campuses to continue their education. Due to Title IX, it is now illegal to forcefully remove pregnant and mothering teens from the public education system (Luttrell, 2003). This is the first piece of legislation that protects the educational rights of pregnant and mothering teens. Even though Title IX mandates equal education, however, this does not mean these students are receiving the same educational opportunities.

Wanda Pillow (2004), in *Unfit Subjects*, explored how dominant and radicalized discourses about pregnant and mothering teens have shaped school responses to these students. She argued that both “good” and “bad” girls who get pregnant and keep their babies are seen as problematic. She identified four discourses that work to make the pregnant teen the “other”: (a) “the brown epidemic”; (b) the cycle of poverty and welfare issue; (c) the teen mother as the “black welfare mother”; and (d) the “children having children” discourse. Each affects teens differently based on their race and socioeconomic background (Pillow, 2004).

Pillow (2004) asserted that all pregnant and mothering teens face barriers in accessing education. In fact, she examined the five basic provisions that schools afford teen mothers: home schooling with no special provisions; home schooling with separate teen pregnancy classes during the school day or after the school day; ability to attend a separate school for the duration of the pregnancy or, in some cases, until graduation; home schooling during pregnancy and for several months after the birth of the child, when the mother returns the home school; and attendance at night school GED classes with no involvement with the home school. All of these provisions remove the pregnant or mothering teen from the regular high school environment at some point in time, which could affect their ability to complete school.

A decision with exponential consequences for teenage mothers is that of whether to remain in school in any capacity. Black teens have the highest rate of staying in school while pregnant, while Hispanic teens have the highest rate of dropping out while pregnant (Pillow, 2004). Even though the social construction of teen pregnancy in our



society would have us believe that dropping out of school is a result of becoming pregnant, teen mothers are likely to complete their high school education or obtain a GED (Pillow, 2004).

Notably, 60% of teen mothers who dropped out did so prior to becoming pregnant (Pillow, 2004). Manlove (1998) also found that a sizable number of women who experienced a teenage pregnancy had dropped out prior to becoming pregnant. In fact, if a teen mother stays in school, she is just as likely to complete high school as her non-mother counterparts (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998), and this persistence has significant effects on economic outcomes for the future. What's more, many teen mothers report *returning* to school due to their pregnancy and motherhood. Some who had previously felt disengaged found a new sense of interest and commitment to their education (Pillow, 2004). Thus, it would appear that the policies that our schools often use to isolate pregnant and mothering teens have not deterred them from finishing their education.

Scholl (2007) did not focus on placing blame on pregnant and mothering teens—as many other articles and books have done, as our society has constructed that view—but instead called for campus administration to help them and to become advocates for young children and adolescent mothers. Scholl's article outlines five proactive leads to be taken by school administrators: gather pertinent data about pregnancy rates and parenting rates; identify the interested stakeholders; develop policies, programs, and activities regarding educating adolescent parents; develop partnerships with other agencies and organizations designed to meet local needs; and evaluate and make

appropriate improvements on an annual basis (Scholl, 2007). All of these suggestions are based on a teen pregnancy program in Arlington, Virginia.

In sum, until recently the preferred policy for dealing with pregnant and mothering teens was to exclude them from the regular school setting or to segregate them from the general population. Title IX has helped to remove some of the barriers that pregnant and mothering teens face, although some barriers persist. These barriers interrupt the educational opportunities of pregnant and mothering teens, and the law has not removed the attitudes and beliefs regarding pregnant and mothering teens. Therefore, as discussed in the next section, the most common approach has been to seek ways to prevent teen pregnancy.

### **Effects of and Responses to Teen Pregnancy**

The majority of the research on teen pregnancy focuses on negative outcomes; as a result, the social construction of teen pregnancy as purely undesirable is further promoted. The scholarship highlights how negative outcomes like poverty and low educational achievement are often present prior to a pregnancy, and they can be compounded due to teenage motherhood (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Moreover, when teenagers become mothers, there are psychological repercussions. The teen years are a time of self-exploration through friendships, dating, and career choices, but the demands of motherhood leave little time to address these aspects of development (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Thus, the research makes clear that the formative nature of the teenage years can be greatly stifled when a young woman becomes a mother during this transitional period of life.

Many teen mothers come from backgrounds of poverty prior to becoming pregnant. When they do not complete school or only obtain a GED, their ability to produce income is greatly impeded. Teen mothers have been found to have doubled the likelihood of poverty compared to their counterparts who delay childbirth, and they are more likely to spend more years of parenting as single mothers (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Although teenage mothers are more likely to marry than non-teenage mothers, they are also more likely to get divorced and less likely to marry in their twenties and thirties (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998).

If a teenage mother does marry, the lack of blue collar work in America can affect the family's ability to earn a sustainable wage (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). By the same token, the increased likelihood of single motherhood has economic implications due to the cost of childcare and the limited ability to earn life-sustaining wages without additional education. Finally, the economic impacts of teen pregnancy also overflow into the ability of teenage mothers to receive proper prenatal care, which helps to ensure healthy mothers and babies (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). The costs of dire health issues for a mother or baby can be a significant economic burden on a teenage mother and her extended family.

Racial factors also play a role in teenage pregnancy. White and Hispanic females are far more likely than African American teenage mothers to experience low income and high poverty rates due to motherhood, in part because African American teenage mothers are more likely to stay in school, delay marriage, and continue to live in their family homes (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Many African American teen mothers

are already in low income, high poverty situations prior to becoming pregnant, thus their pregnancies do not move them into poverty. Some researchers even believe that early childbearing for African American teens is an adaptation to early onset of health problems for African American females and the large number of African American households headed by single parents, as well as the increased rate of poverty for these families (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). There are many factors that affect teenage mothers' lives. These adverse effects are likely the reason that the federal government has produced monetary incentives for teaching abstinence-only until marriage.

### **Abstinence-Only Programming**

Schools, governments, and society have long been committed to the prevention of teen pregnancy. The push to begin teaching abstinence in schools began in 1996 with a shift in funding, \$168 million per year, to programs that strictly teach abstinence and restrict information about contraceptives (Santelli et al, 2006). In recent years, the United States has spent as much as \$500 million annually on abstinence-only education in public schools (Pillow, 2004). In Texas schools, Title IV is the funding mechanism behind this shift (Rasberry et al., 2007). In Texas, the curriculum is taught by middle school science teachers and high school health teachers.

Rasberry et al. (2007) outlined the importance of teachers' perceived self-efficacy in their ability to teach abstinence-only classes. Educators who believed that abstinence-only teaching was theory-based had an increased belief in their ability to change a student's abstinence behavior. They also found that non-White instructors had a higher belief in their ability to effect behavior changes in their pupils, and that teachers had

significantly different views on their ability to perpetuate the practice of abstinence as compared to their ability to change the sexual behavior of their students. The same teachers who teach abstinence-only sex education in schools also teach pregnant teenage females, some of whom are in schools with student childcare facilities.

Abstinence-only curricula promote traditional gender roles that further construct society's views of heteronormality (Fields, 2008). Fields, like others, has asserted that the sexuality of teens is viewed by society as something that needs to be solved, delayed, or muted, and that teachers and students need to be able to have conversations and interactions that promote open, honest, and transformative sexual communication. Abstinence-only education provides teens with only one option: to abstain from having sex (Friedman, 2005). They are not given information on other ways to prevent pregnancy.

### **Programs for Teenage Parents**

Dellano et al. (1999) asserted that programs provided by schools for teenage parents can be controversial, in part because of the costs involved and the perception that parenting is made to appear too easy. However, in a case study of a teen parenting program that included an infant-toddler center at the school, parenting classes, parent support groups, career training, tutoring, mentoring, a grandparent support group, and a young fathers group, most of the faculty and student perceptions were positive (Dellano et al., 1999). Faculty overwhelmingly said that the program was successful in helping parents to stay in school, and the students did not perceive that the in-school program made being a teenage parent look easy or enjoyable (Dellano et al., 1999).

Evidence suggests that many of the problems associated with adolescent pregnancy and parenting can be diminished through social support and school-based programs that provide counseling, health, care, health teaching, and education about child development for the teen parents (Williams & Sadler, 2001). In an era with teenage motherhood rates on the rise, educators are seeking alternatives to keep mothers in school and increase their likelihood of success. Programs that are locally based are likely in contrast to the abstinence-only education being taught within the same schools. This is where the clash of the two policies begins; one policy is driven by the federal and state governments in an attempt to stop teenage sexual activity, while the other is the local school district's response to keeping teenage mothers in schools and dropout rates to a minimum.

### **Teen Pregnancy and Mothering**

The raising of children has traditionally been the responsibility of the mother. Even though teen pregnancy is a taboo in our society, teen mothers are expected to raise and mother their children in spite of their age. Douglas and Michaels (2004) examined the many images of mothering over a 30-years span. The authors asserted that women remain the best primary caregivers of children, but that no matter how hard they try, they will never achieve ideal mothering. For example, in the 1970s, advertising focused on the needs of the mother—albeit things like hand cream, hair dye, and toilet cleaners. By the 1990s, the focus of advertising had shifted to mothers taking care of their children's every need. By these standards, to be a remotely decent mother, the authors contended, a woman would have to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and

intellectual being, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to her children. This work is important because it constructs the role of the mother within societal frameworks. This construction of motherhood and the role of women as primary caregivers of children affects teen mothers and pregnant teens. Many programs and policies are made with the central idea that mothers are the primary caregivers of children. Thus, their book illustrates how teen pregnancy is constructed as a woman's issue.

Since teen pregnancy is seen as the primary responsibility of the female, many books are written on the topic for the female audience. For example, *Teen Pregnancy: Tough Choices* (Endsbe, 2000) is a manual of sorts, set up like a textbook. The book outlines three options for pregnant and mothering teens: parenting, adoption, and abortion. Its goal is to help pregnant teens understand what to expect and ultimately make informed decisions. A handbook put out by the Child Welfare League of America (Roles, 1989) provides information to pregnant teens so they can make socially acceptable decisions regarding their pregnancies. The author identified four alternatives for pregnant teens: getting married; adoption; keeping the baby; and abortion. This resource fosters the social construct of marriage as the acceptable norm and thus reinforces many social constructs surrounding teen pregnancy. Roles outlined alternatives in a specific order, arguably with a deliberate agenda, to influence the audience into making a decision that society would be okay with.

Immell (2001) and Endsbe (2000) each outlined three options for pregnant teens: keeping the baby, adoption, and abortion. Immell urged pregnant teens to seek counseling rather than making decisions on their own. She gave firsthand accounts from

teens that made each of the three decisions regarding pregnancy and asserted a need for childcare in the United States in general. This need is coupled with the need for programs and policies within schools that are geared toward fostering successful pregnant and mothering teens.

Kelly (2003) conducted an ethnographic study that analyzed the Teenage Parents Program in a Canadian high school. She called for further inquiry into what is being taught and whether that knowledge is important. Further, she noted that students need to develop their sense of self-worth and learn acceptable ways of expressing their needs. Kelly also asserted that, as a society, we tend to value things that produce monetary value. Care giving does not necessarily do so, though it is a vital contribution. Care giving, specifically in the form of mothering is specific to females, therefore it is necessary to explore feminism.

### **Feminism**

As DiQuinzo (1999) noted, “Mothering is...a very contentious issue in American feminism” (p. ix). DiQuinzo continued: “Feminism in the United States...has never been characterized by a monolithic position on mothering. Some feminists have argued that mothering is the source of women’s limitations or the cause of women’s oppression, because it is the experience in which women most suffer under the tyranny of nature, biology, and/or male control” (p. ix). Feminism is a necessary lens through which to examine teen pregnancy and mothering because the subject is inherently a women’s issue.



Feminist scholarship seeks to understand women's lives without using categories that were designed to make sense of men's lives (Jaggar, 2007). Pregnancy and mothering are strictly female functions and abilities that cannot be categorized according to the lives of men. By using a feminist framework, I seek to give the women participants a voice and to use the results of the research to improve the living conditions of the subjects, which incorporates action research with a participatory and feminist approach (Bootinand, 2008). DiQuinzio outlined a discourse in feminist research that contrasts individualism with universalism (1999). This research used feminism to find individual truths and not broad universals.

Women are beset on all sides by contradictory pressures about whether and how to become mothers (DiQuinzio, 1999). According to Luker (1996), all women, rich and poor, teenage and older, make decisions regarding childbearing and marriage within the context of feelings, values, beliefs, and commitments. All of these influences on decision making outline the intersectionality of motherhood with feelings, values, beliefs, and commitments, and this intersectionality is coupled with the age of the woman. The decision to become a mother cannot be isolated from the context of life. By analyzing language, however, the researcher can seek to understand how experience produces identity (Scott, 2008).

Feminist theory challenges individualism in several ways. First, it challenges gender neutrality that individualism claims for its account of subjectivity. Second, feminist theory's appeal to difference challenges the adequacy of individualism as subjective. More specifically, feminist theory challenges the individualist claim that

subjectivity can and should be understood apart from these contexts, and argues instead that an adequate account understands subjectivity in terms of these concepts. Third, the dilemma of differences in feminism and feminist theory generates paradoxes with respect to representation—if feminism represents women in terms of their individualist subjectivity, it risks denying the specificity of women’s experiences and situations (DiQuinzio, 1999). Feminist theory cannot avoid and should not refuse the issue of mothering, despite the formidable risks of theorizing mothering (DiQuinzio, 1999). As DiQuinzio asserted, feminist theory needs to abandon the goal of developing a unitary and totalizing account of motherhood.

Rich (1976) stated that there are two meanings of motherhood: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children, and the institution, which aims at ensuring that this potential—and all women—remain under male control. Rich (1976) also asserted that women’s work is subversive to the home and to patriarchal marriage, and that the physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is the heaviest social burden. Bok (1987) likewise asserted that this is still a patriarchal society where men hold the power, and that poverty has been feminized due to female-headed households. Most importantly, Bok noted:

Teenagers who bear children have not internalized a feminist perspective and adolescent girls who have a feminist perspective would engage in sexual activity only when they want to, would be able to discuss contraception and would expect the use of contraceptives to be a joint responsibility of them and their partners, would postpone childbearing while they planned and prepared for a career and

would challenge the oppressive societal views toward women that encourage pregnancy, dependence on welfare, and poverty. (Bok, 1987, p. 52)

Doing feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of the inquiry (Lather, 1988). The goal of feminist research is to correct the invisibility and distortion of the female experience in ways that seek to end the unequal social position of women (Lather, 1988). Lather (1988) stated that women researchers need to find ways to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Women are at the center of the current inquiry, and the very nature of their gender is imperative to the research.

### **Summary**

Teen pregnancy and mothering have and likely will continue to be contentious issues. The mere mention of teen pregnancy invites a litany of opinions. The majority of people see it as a negative life event. Many people believe that it precipitates an automatic failure in life. These views are largely influenced by how our society and the media construct the issue of teen pregnancy. This social construction leads people to believe that all pregnant and mothering teens will drop out of high school, that all pregnant and mothering teens are poor, that all pregnant and mothering teens are minorities, and that all pregnant and mothering teens are on welfare. These socially constructed views of pregnant and mothering teens have put us on a quest to stop teen pregnancy.

This quest is evident from the amount of literature on teen pregnancy prevention—literature that crosses many different areas of academia, from education, to health, to sociology and psychology. All of these different fields and more are seeking

to prevent teen pregnancy. Our federal government spends a considerable amount of money to put abstinence-only education into high schools. Teen pregnancy rates seem to go down one year and up the next. As a society, however, there is a large collective movement to try and stop teen pregnancy. Teen pregnancy as a social issue has led to the need for policies and laws to be adopted.

Prior to Title IX, many pregnant and mothering teens were forced to drop out or leave the regular school setting. In many places, pregnant teens would try to hide their pregnancies in order to not be forced to drop out of school. Even though Title IX secures the educational rights of pregnant and mothering teens to stay in traditional educational settings, it does not ensure that school districts will not pressure students into other settings. There is very little litigation involving the rights of pregnant and mothering teens. Pregnant and mothering teens tend to be a population without a strong voice.

Through this review of the extant literature, many aspects of mothering in general were examined. Mothering is arguably controversial, regardless of the age of the mother. Women tend to take on much larger parenting roles than their male counterparts; it is the expectation of a large portion of society that women will be the primary caregivers for children. In recent years, the media have seemed to amplify the role of mother as caregiver. Advertisements overtly and covertly engage the idea that a woman's entire focus should be on the wellbeing of her children. The majority of literature and programs surrounding teen pregnancy are specifically targeted to females. The role of the fathers and how being a teen parent affects them are not addressed through this literature review or study.

Through this study I do not seek to sway anyone's beliefs on teen pregnancy or mothering. This research does not seek ways to prevent teen pregnancy. Instead, my goal is to give voice to pregnant and mothering teens—specifically, pregnant and mothering teens who do not just graduate with the minimum high school requirements, but who graduate having completed a college preparatory curriculum. This research seeks to give a voice to these teen mothers who do not fit the stereotype. It seeks to provide educators with tools and information, so that perhaps pregnant and mothering teens will be on a track that sets them up for a full range of postsecondary options.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

I have spent more than a decade teaching in K–12 schools. In that time I have experienced a number of students who have been pregnant and become mothers. There is a lack of research on the subject and a lack of tools for educators who wish to more effectively teach these students. With that in mind, I sought to understand the educational experiences of pregnant teens and teen mothers in the public school system and, through the responses of the participants, how the system can be improved.

The primary focus of this study was to give a voice to pregnant and mothering teens who graduate from high school after completing academically rigorous high school programs. Based on a thorough review of the literature—described in the previous chapter—it was clear that a qualitative study of the experiences of pregnant and mothering teens was necessary. The study was guided by the following research question: *What are the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens in the public high school setting who graduate on the Recommended High School or Distinguished Achievement Program?*

#### **Methodological Framework**

In order to derive a sound answer to the guiding research question, it is essential that the methodology and the methods align. According to Gough (2000), methodology is a theory of producing knowledge through research; it provides a guide for the way a researcher proceeds. Because I sought to understand the educational experiences of

teenage mothers, I used participant observation, which allowed me to be closely involved with the subjects (Merriam, 1991). Procedures such as open-ended interviews and participant observations enable the researcher to generate qualitative data (Schwandt, 2001). The methods used to conduct the current study included observations, field notes, individual interviews, and focus groups (Merriam, 1988).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials. These materials are personal experiences; introspection; life stories; case studies; artifacts; interviews; and cultural contexts. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) asserted that the qualitative research paradigm is multi-method in its focus and involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the subject matter. Thus, qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings and attempt to make sense of or interpret how people bring meaning to these different life experiences.

The objective of this study was to obtain an in-depth and detailed understanding of the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens who graduate from high school on a rigorous, college preparatory curriculum, and to shed light on practices, systems, structures, and behaviors that enhance or hinder these experiences. Qualitative research is conducted to empower individuals (Creswell, 2007). Empowering these individuals to share their stories and to hear their voices was a goal of this research.

### **Role of the Researcher**

One of the fundamental differences between qualitative and quantitative research is the role of the researcher. In qualitative research, the researcher examines phenomena

from a subjective perspective. This allows her to look for meaning and understanding that go beyond statistical and numerical data. Qualitative researchers believe in understanding a phenomenon by viewing it in its context. Thus, the researcher becomes immersed in the culture or organization that is being studied (Krauss, 2005). As researcher, I designed the study, collected data, facilitated focus groups and interviews, transcribed data, analyzed data, and reported results. I have been immersed in the environment as a teacher in public schools since 2000.

Creswell (2007) discussed the need to minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study. In this case, as a teacher in the school that was also the site of the study, I sought to minimize any power relationships that may have existed between me as the researcher and my participants as former students in the school where I teach. I always referred to myself by my first name when speaking with participants. I discussed my own child and asked them for parenting suggestions. I sought to establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships (Creswell, 1998). During discussions and interviews I reminded them I was a researcher, not their teacher. The fact that I was never the teacher of record for any of the participants during the study also minimized the teacher/student power dynamic.

### **Demographics of the Research Context**

An exploration of the demographics of the city where this research took place is necessary in order to understand the context of the study. The city is a large metropolitan area in Texas with extensive sprawling suburbs. It currently has several of the fastest growing areas in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau



(2010) this city's population is more than 2 million people and growing, with an estimated 2012 population of 2.1 million. The population in the suburbs and surrounding areas of this city is booming due to the strong economy, which is largely based on the community's strong ties to the energy industry.

This city is considered by many to be a multi-national city. It is known for a strong economy, great food, and overall friendly and welcoming atmosphere. It has a very diverse population. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), 23% of the population is African American, 6% is Asian, 43% is Hispanic, and 25% is White of non-Hispanic descent. There are nearly 900,000 households, with 2.69 persons per household. Forty-five percent of the population own a home, and 79% have lived in the same house for over one year. In 2010, the median household income was \$44,648, with a per capita income of \$27,029. Twenty-two percent of the population was living below the poverty line. Nearly three quarters (74%) of the population had a high school diploma, while 28% had a bachelor's degree.

### **Demographics of Valor High School**

Valor High School (a pseudonym) lies in one of the suburban areas of this large Southern Central city. The school is within a district that is among the top five largest in the state. This school district has been experiencing rapid growth, adding over 1,000 students every year for the past 10 years. According to the 2013 Texas Education Agency Texas Academic Performance Report, Valor High School educates roughly 3,400 students within a district of approximately 109,000 students. Students are enrolled

in grades nine through 12, and in the most recent data available, 28.5% were freshman, 26.5% were sophomores, 24% were juniors, and 21% were seniors.

Valor High School is a majority minority campus. According to the Texas Education Agency (2013), 21% of students identify as African American, 55% identify as Hispanic, 13% are White, and 6% are of Asian descent. Sixty-two percent of the students are economically disadvantaged, meaning they qualify for free or reduced lunch. Five percent are English Language Learners. Two percent of the students had disciplinary placements during the 2011–2012 school year and 49% of the student body is considered at-risk. Valor High School has a 15% mobility rate, which reflects the percentage of students who have attended other high schools (i.e., they have moved during high school) (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

Since this study focuses on a specific type of graduate, it is important to examine the types of graduates within Valor High School. Within the graduating class of 2013, 20% of students were African American, 53.7% were Hispanic, 15.3% were White, 7.2% were Asian, and 3% identified as two or more races. Twenty-eight percent graduated on the Minimum High School Plan and 72% graduated on the Recommended or Distinguished Achievement High School Programs (described in detail in a later section of this chapter). Sixty-eight percent of African American, 68% of Hispanic, 83% of White, and 92.2% of Asian students graduated on the Recommended High School or Distinguished Achievement Programs (Texas Education Agency, 2015).

The graduating class of 2012 was roughly equal in size to the class of 2013. Twenty percent of these graduates were African American, 51% were Hispanic, 20%

were White, and 6% were Asian. Two percent of the graduating class of 2012 identified as two or more races. Of the 706 graduates, 31% graduated on the Minimum High School Program and 69% graduated on the Recommended High School or Distinguished Achievement Programs (Texas Education Agency, 2013). Sixty-three percent of African American students graduated on the Recommended and Distinguished programs, as did 65% of Hispanics, 80% of Whites, and 85% of Asians (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

According to the Texas Education Agency's 2012–2013 School Report Card, 69% of the students in the class of 2011 graduated on the Recommended and Distinguished plans. Within this graduating class, 63% of the African American students, 66% of Hispanic students, 72% of Whites, and 95% of Asians graduated on the Recommended and Distinguished plans (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

Neither the federal nor the state departments of education publish data on the graduation rates of pregnant and mothering teens. Likewise, the local school districts do not publish these data. If they collect it, it is unknown and I was unable to obtain it. All data kept by Valor High School on pregnant and mothering teens is kept purely by hand; there are no electronic records kept about these young women. Therefore the specific numbers of pregnant and mothering teens, their graduation rates, and their graduation plans are not kept by Valor High School. Valor High School was opened in response to population growth needs and has only operated for the past six school years. The school opened with freshmen and sophomores, and it has had five graduating classes to date: 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015.

## Graduation Requirements

In this study, I used graduation plans to define student success. As such, one of the requirements for participation was graduation on the Recommended High School or Distinguished Achievement Program. Per the Texas Education Agency (2013), a student must earn a minimum of 26 credits to complete the Recommended High School Program. The student must demonstrate proficiency in the four core areas of education—math, science, English, and social studies. The standards for graduating on the Distinguished Achievement Program are similar to those for the Recommended High School Program. Table 1 shows the required distribution of credits for these plans, as well as for the Minimum High School Program.

Table 1  
*Required Credits for Each Graduation Plan*

	<b>Minimum High School Program</b>	<b>Recommended High School Program</b>	<b>Distinguished Achievement Program</b>
English Language Arts	4 credits	4 credits	4 credits
Mathematics	3 credits	4 credits	4 credits
Science	2 credits	4 credits	4 credits
Social Studies	2.5 credits	3.5 credits	3.5 credits
Economics	.5 credit	.5 credit	.5 credit
Language Other Than English	n/a	2 credits	3 credits
Physical Education	1 credit	1 credit	1 credit
Speech	.5 credit	.5 credit	.5 credit
Fine Arts	1 credit	1 credit	1 credit
Electives	6.5 credits	5.5 credits	4.5 credits
Academic Electives	1 credit	n/a	n/a

Students who graduate on the Distinguished Achievement Program also need to complete one of three advanced measures options. The first option is an original research project. The second option is based on test data. Qualifying test data would be a score of three or higher on a College Board Advanced Placement exam, a score of four or above on the International Baccalaureate examination, or a Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. The third option is that students take college academic courses and earn grades of 3.0 or higher (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

These two graduation plans are the more rigorous plans on which students can complete high school. Students are required to participate in the Recommended Plan until they turn 16 years old, at which point they may choose to complete the Minimum High School Program, which requires only 22 credits for graduation (Table 1). This plan greatly reduces the amount of coursework a student must complete in the four core areas. Students who complete high school on the Minimum program are not eligible to attend a four-year college or university. If they wish to enroll in postsecondary education, they must start at a community or junior college.

### **Participants**

Qualitative research is not only characterized by the methods through which data are collected, but also by the number of participants. Qualitative studies typically have a small sample size to yield an in-depth description. For this study, I utilized a purposive sampling technique. Specifically, I selected individuals and the site due to their ability to inform an understanding of the research question (Creswell, 2007). According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007), purposive sampling is not designed to achieve population

trustworthiness, meaning it is not necessary for the research population to mirror that of any other context. The intent of the research is to have a thorough understanding of the selected individuals, rather than to represent a defined population.

This research demanded the use of a purposive sample. Participants had to be female students, age 18 or older, who were graduating or who had earlier graduated from Valor High School on certain college preparatory curriculum plans, and who were also pregnant or mothering during high school. As a condition of conducting research in Valor High School, I had to contact potential participants through the school's lead counselor, and in April of 2013 she developed a list of names of potential participants using her informal records on pregnant and mothering teens within the school.

The counselor called a meeting to introduce me to them, to explain the project, and to extend an invitation to participate. There were six potential participants within the school in April of 2013—a very small number of potential participants in a school with 3,400 students. From these six, three decided to participate and brought back the required permission slips. One of the potential candidates wanted to join, but had to drop to a less rigorous curricular program, so she was no longer eligible. Another potential candidate contacted me and said she was interested, but when I later contacted her she was no longer available.

I asked the participants if they knew anyone who might like to join the study. Through word of mouth, I learned of another interested mother, however she was not yet 18. After she turned 18, I contacted her and she agreed to join the study. Another participant happened to be my former student, whom I had recently seen and spoken

with about my study, and she expressed that she wanted to be involved. She had already graduated from Valor High School when she became a participant. I did not allow any of my current students to be a part of the study. The final sample consisted of five mothering teens over the age of 18, all of whom had graduated on the Recommended High School or Distinguished Achievement Programs. Of the five participants, four were Hispanic and one was White.

### **Informed Consent**

The first step I took was to secure permission from the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A). Texas A&M University requested that I obtain permission from the Office of Research in the school district where Valor High School is located (see Appendix B). Per the district's requirements, I then contacted the lead counselor at Valor High School, who set up a meeting with the first group of potential study participants. The potential participants were given informed consent paperwork but were instructed to only have parental signatures obtained, per requirements of the school district. Once parental permission was obtained, a first interview date and time was established. Informed consent was obtained from each participant immediately preceding her first interview.

First, I explained verbally the purpose of the study and assured the participants I would protect their identities and maintain confidentiality. I then explained their role within the research and provided them with a written copy of the Informed Consent (see Appendix C). I obtained their verbal and written permission to audiotape and transcribe the interviews and focus group meetings. They were assured that security measures

would be taken to protect their identities. All participants were advised that audio taping was optional, and that if they did not feel comfortable I would only take notes during interviews and focus groups. All of the participants agreed to be audiotape during their interviews and focus groups.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection that originates from multiple sources of information is imperative to qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Data can be collected in many forms, including documents, records, interviews, observations, and physical artifacts (Creswell, 2007). In this study, data were collected through open-ended interviews, focus group discussions, and field notes.

The participants were invited to participate in two face-to-face, open-ended interviews. Each interview typically lasted 45 minutes. One participant was only able to participate in one interview due to the birth of her second child. The participants were also invited to participate in two focus group discussions that typically lasted one hour each. The first interview was in June of 2013, and the last focus group meeting was in January of 2014. Three students—whom I will call Jessica, Karina, and Jamie—participated in both focus groups. Two others—Lynn and Mary—were unable to attend.

I also took field notes and recorded my observations. As a teacher in Valor High School, I would occasionally have the opportunity to observe the participants within the school setting, exclusively in the halls during passing periods. The observations were made informally while the participants were in hallways near my classroom while they were participants in the study. In sum, the data for this study were gathered through



audio recordings, field notes, and observations made during one-on-one interviews, as well as focus group meetings and informal observations within Valor High School.

The goal of the interviews and focus groups was to obtain thick, rich description—part of the foundation of qualitative research. The interviews were held in the local community, such as at a local fast food restaurant. Two interviews were held in the deli area of a local grocery store, and two others were held after school in a classroom at Valor High School. The focus group meetings both occurred at local fast food restaurants. I relied on the same protocol that was used for the one-on-one interviews. Field notes were created during the interviews and following my observations at Valor High School.

### **Protocol**

A set of semi-structured, open-ended interview questions was developed and used for all interviews and focus group discussions (see Appendix E). Semi-structured interviewing involves asking a series of structured questions and then probing more deeply with open-ended questions to obtain additional information (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). I developed the interview questions based on the review of literature and over ten years of experience teaching pregnant and mothering teens. The participants were also invited to create additional questions to add to the protocol. The interview questions were developed with the goal of yielding unbiased responses and data. As the researcher, I met with each participant and conducted each interview. I also facilitated the focus group meetings.

## **Data Analysis**

I transcribed the audio recorded data from the nine interviews and two focus group discussions into a word processor format. In order to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions, I listened to the audiotapes and compared them to the transcriptions, and then compared the transcriptions to the field notes. Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was completed in two ways. The researcher asked participants for clarification during the interviews and focus group meetings. Finally, the research participants checked the transcriptions for accuracy.

After listening to the audiotapes and reading the many transcripts, I began to identify patterns in the data (Huberman & Miles, 1994). I conducted an interpretational analysis, following the constant comparative method laid out by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This method requires saturation of data, and involves four steps: comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory. The data were organized based on similarities and differences. Concepts emerged on their own, and thus the main themes were identified. After the main themes were identified, the subcategories were identified from the data.

## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is the claim that is made about the meaning of dependable evidence and the methods used to assemble such evidence (Schwandt, 2007). In order to ensure trustworthiness throughout this study I incorporated several procedures. Creswell (2007) noted that using one or more of the

following procedures helps to ensure trustworthiness: member checks, triangulation of data, thick, rich description, or peer or external audits of the data. For this research, I employed the procedures of member checking, triangulation of the sources of data, and thick, rich description. I discuss each in turn.

### **Triangulation**

In order to strengthen reliability and produce internal trustworthiness, this study used triangulation as defined by multiple researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998). Triangulation is the process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning by verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 2009). Thus, there is a need to obtain multiple perceptions in order to clarify meaning and, through this process, repeatability of the observations can be verified. Multiple perceptions and clarification of meaning were obtained from the participants through the use of open-ended, semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which provided multiple perceptions and clarification in order to meet Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) definition of triangulation.

According to Creswell (2007), having multiple sources, methods, investigators, and theories fosters triangulation. There were five participants in the current study that were invited to participate in two interviews and two focus groups. As such, this use of multiple sources and multiple methods provided the study with trustworthiness. Following Schwandt (2007), I also compared data from my observations to data from the interviews and focus group meetings as a further means of triangulation.

### **Rich and Thick Description**

Creswell (2007) noted that rich, thick description allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability based on details the writer provides about the participants or the setting of the study. Schwandt (2007) added that to thickly describe social action is to actually interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, and motivations that characterize a particular episode. Throughout this dissertation I provide thick and rich descriptions by including a detailed profile of each participant and of the research settings. I have also recorded the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, and motivations that characterized the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens who graduated on certain rigorous curriculum plans. These descriptions help to ensure trustworthiness for this study.

### **Member Checking**

Following transcription of the audiotapes and field notes, I provided a draft to each of the participants and asked for their feedback. Any comments that were received were addressed and then rechecked with the participants. The participants' feedback ensured an accurate representation of the information obtained during the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that the research results, in a rough draft form, should be given to the participants to examine. Asking participants to check transcripts and submit corrections allowed them to check responses and provide input, which further ensures the accuracy and trustworthiness of the study.

## **Researcher Bias**

It is important for qualitative researchers to understand and disclose their own biases (Merriam, 1988). This study relied on participants' views of their educational experiences, as well as my interpretations of those views. Therefore, it is important to disclose and understand any of my biases as the researcher.

I have been a teacher for the past 14 years. I have taught varying grade levels, from fifth grade through twelfth grade (see Appendix F). The majority of my teaching has occurred in the content area of science. Over the years I have encountered an extremely wide variety of students. I have had students who were in life skills classes because they were intellectually disabled, as well as students who were considered gifted and talented. Throughout the entirety of my teaching career I have worked at predominately minority schools with high populations of economically disadvantaged students—i.e., students who qualified for free or reduced lunch.

This diversity among the students I have taught has led me to encounter many different life situations. In my fourth year of teaching, I had my first experience teaching a pregnant or mothering teen. It was at that point that I realized I had no knowledge base for how to teach this specific population. I was not offered any resources to help ensure that I was using peer-reviewed, research-driven methods to effectively teach this population. For the most part, there is a lack of information geared for teachers who teach pregnant and mothering teens. I found myself feeling ill-prepared and wary of what the best practices would be in order to ensure this student's success. Over the ten years that followed, I sought out data, research, and information in

order to grow my knowledge base, so that I could be the best possible teacher for all students who entered my classroom.

As a teacher, not only do I deal with students, but also with teachers and administrators. There have been many occasions when I have heard teachers, administrators, and school staff make comments about pregnant and mothering teens. From my vantage point, there is an overwhelming number of teachers, administrators, and school staff who have opinions about pregnant and mothering teens. They often comment about how these students have it “so easy” because we have daycare at our school. They make comments about the moral character of these students, about their age, about the fact that they are having sex, and about their choices to keep their children. The perceptions of the teachers, administrators, and school staff undoubtedly have a negative impact on the education these students are receiving.

As a teacher for the past 14 years, the past 10 years with pregnant and mothering teens, I have an opinion. When I was younger I was far more judgmental of these students; I believed much of the accepted rhetoric about how pregnant and mothering teens were bad students, destined for failure, below average learners, and in need of sex education. Over the years I have learned that many of these students are very intelligent, are prone to getting pregnant shortly after they first start having sex, and have immense amounts of responsibility on their plates, as well as that many have been preyed upon by older men. I watch as they are looked down and up by their peers and teachers. I see them struggle in their classes. I watch them miss day after day with morning sickness

and medical appointments. I see these young women, who are extremely intelligent and extremely capable, watch as their lives seemingly crumble around them.

I had not personally experienced pregnancy until three years ago. I had absolutely no idea what it was like to be pregnant and in school. Granted, I am in college; however, I do work in a high school and am bound by the same bells as the students. Forty-five minutes can be an excruciatingly long time to wait while you have a small human sitting on your bladder. The school halls are a treacherous place, filled with thousands of other people who push, shove, and in general can be very rude. Random people come up and try to touch you. I am a pretty sturdy woman—I do not back down from much, and I gave birth naturally without pain medicine—but walking the halls of this school was scary and painful while I was pregnant. The entire experience was, for me, frightening. You constantly have eyes on you, even as a teacher. I can only imagine what the experience is like as a teenager. After being pregnant in a school, I gained a new appreciation for what these young women encounter every day.

As a mother, I often find myself jealous of some of my students. Every day at third period the babies come around the school for a walk. I see my students' children and selfishly wish that my child were with them. I wish that my son could come to school with me and then I would not be so far away from him every day. I have been told that the teachers' children are not allowed to come to our school daycare, as that would violate conditions of their funding. I wish that I was able to have him here, so that does make me jealous of that small piece of their lives. I realize, however, that

these young women are facing terrifying odds. They are no longer going to be able to go away for college; they are often shunned by their parents, families, friends, and teachers; they have yet to experience many things in life. When I think about all of the challenges they must overcome, my jealousy over the small aspect of having their children here diminishes. These young women have a tremendous amount of life on their plates.

As a researcher, I have tried to set aside my biases. Throughout the research I have tried to set aside my role as teacher, yet it is hard. The participants in this study see me as a teacher, even though I have had only one of them in my class. They anticipate that I will be judgmental; they anticipate that I will tell other teachers or administrators what they tell me. They still feel the need to call me Ms. Gregg, even though I sign everything with Karee and tell them they do not need to refer to me like I am their teacher. Some roles in life are just tough to shake, and I think “teacher” is one of those roles that forever defines who you are as a person to those around you. It is my hope that by stating my personal biases up front, I can create a venue for openness and honesty throughout this narrative (Creswell, 2003).

### **Summary**

Chapter III has been dedicated to the discussion of the necessary elements in qualitative research. This chapter has demonstrated how this study adheres to and follows rigorous qualitative research methods. First, I provided an exploration of how participants were chosen to participate in this study. I also examined demographic data for Valor High School and the city within which the school is situated. I presented the range of high school graduation requirements in order to provide to the reader a clear



description of the rigor of the different graduation programs. Finally, I described how qualitative research methods were used to ensure reliability and trustworthiness within this study, and also addressed the issue of researcher biases.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

The primary goal of this study was to examine the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens who graduate on either the Recommended High School or Distinguished Achievement Program—two academically rigorous plans that make students college eligible upon completion. While most of the literature focuses on the negative aspects of being a pregnant or mothering teen, this study sought to provide another lens through which to view these students by documenting their journeys as they successfully completed high school. In this chapter, I draw on the qualitative data gathered during face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and observations to describe the results of the research.

As they shared their educational experiences, the participants in this study discussed openly many of the challenges they have encountered and had to overcome. Through the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, several themes emerged: school relationships, support systems, balance, and motivation. It is hoped that results related to these themes will add to the existing literature that is available to school administrators and teachers to assist in the goal of having all students successfully graduate from high school. Before I describe these results, it is important to share the stories of the five women who participated in the research.

## Study Participants

Purposive sampling for this study resulted in five participants. There were four Hispanic females and one White female involved in the study. (See Table 2.) In order to protect their identities and privacy, all participants and the individuals they named during the course of the research have been assigned pseudonyms.

Table 2  
*Participant Characteristics*

Participant	Ethnicity	Age During Study	Age at First Pregnancy	Graduation Plan	Relative Age of Baby's Father	No. of Children
Karina	Hispanic	19	15	Recommended (top 10%)	Older	1
Mary	Hispanic	20	17	Recommended	Same	2
Lynn	White	20	17	Distinguished	Older	1
Jessica	Hispanic	19	16	Recommended	Same	1
Jamie	Hispanic	18	14	Recommended	Same	2

Below I provide a brief profile of each participant. Each profile contains details obtained from face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and/or observations of participants in the school setting. In this study, listening to the participants and capturing their voices and perspectives helped me to have a better understanding of their educational experiences as pregnant and mothering teens. Each of these young women has a unique story and met the definition of “success” used in this study. The short synopses of their lives that follow are by no means a complete picture of who they are, just a mere glimpse into their lives.

## **Karina**

The first participant I met with was Karina. She was extremely eager to start the research study. Karina graduated in 2013 on the Recommended High School Plan. She also graduated in the top 10% of her high school class. She did not know she was in the top 10% of her class until the last semester of her senior year, this is important in Texas because this grants students automatic admittance into state supported colleges and Universities.. When she found out, she came by my classroom and said “I am in the top 10% of my class,” I immediately congratulated her in a loud and enthusiastic manner; I felt so much joy for her. Karina became pregnant during her sophomore year of high school, when she was 15 years old. Prior to getting pregnant, Karina was very active in sports and school activities. At the time of the study she was living with her son, her boyfriend, and her boyfriend’s parents. She was attending pharmacy technician school and indicated she would graduate in April of 2015. She then planned to work and attend college.

## **Mary**

Mary graduated from high school in June of 2013 on the Recommended High School Plan. She became pregnant with her daughter during her junior year of high school, at age 17. When I met Mary she was going to school and working, and she was a full-time mother. I did not know at the time that Mary was pregnant with her second child, a son, to whom she gave birth after she graduated from high school. Mary was the most guarded participant. She said the least amount possible to answer the questions and did not elaborate beyond the question asked. By the conclusion of the study, Mary had

graduated from high school and was a stay at home mother. She had not yet started college, but she did plan to go to school. She explained that she had logistical issues with child care and that was delaying her college attendance.

### **Lynn**

Lynn graduated from high school in 2011. At the beginning of her senior year she enlisted in the Army. She had tested to become an E3 enlisted nuclear specialist and had signed all of her paperwork to ensure her enlistment when she graduated from high school. During this same year, Lynn was living with her adult boyfriend and working. She became pregnant around December of her senior year, when she was 17 years old. Lynn spent much of the remainder of her senior year trying to hide her pregnancy. During the final semester, it became a struggle for Lynn to conceal her pregnancy and form a new plan for after graduation. She became very ill and began missing many days of school. Once Lynn finally came out about her pregnancy, school became less of a struggle, and she graduated on the Distinguished Achievement Plan.

After graduation, Lynn was still interested in fulfilling her dream of going into the Army. However, with the birth of her son came new rules: in order for her to join the Army, she would have to give up custody of her son. This was not an option for Lynn, so she pursued a different route. She decided to complete courses through a University of Phoenix online program so that she could continue to work and provide for her son. At the conclusion of the study, Lynn was working full time and studying to become a health care administrator. She and the father of her child had separated, but she was still living with members of his family.

**Jessica**

Jessica was 16 years old when she became pregnant. She graduated from high school in 2012 on the Recommended High School Program. Jessica hid her pregnancy from her family until she was seven months pregnant, and she did not seek any medical advice during her first two trimesters. When her father found out she was pregnant, he told her she had ruined her life. Jessica expressed that this was very difficult for her, and she felt as if she let her family—and specifically her father—down, she told me that she was devastated. At the time of the study, Jessica was living with her boyfriend's family, who expected her to cook and clean for them while she was there with her daughter, she said that she wanted to move home- but her boyfriend did not want to live with her parents. After Jessica graduated from high school she sat out one semester of college. During the study period, she was enrolled in and attending the community college in the area.

**Jamie**

At the time of the research, Jamie was an 18-year-old senior. She graduated on the Recommended High School plan in June of 2014. Jamie is the mother of two boys. She became pregnant during her freshman year of high school when she was 14 years old. Prior to that, Jamie expressed, she was a “wild child.” She and her boyfriend would skip school regularly, and she was often suspended and in trouble. She had a history of cursing out teachers and making very poor grades. After she became a mother, she claims she changed her ways. During her first pregnancy she lived with her mother. After her first son was born she moved in with her boyfriend's father and stepmother.

Jamie explained that she and the stepmother had a very volatile relationship, in part because the stepmother expected Jamie to cook and clean for the entire family.

Jamie got pregnant with her second son while on birth control. During her second pregnancy, Jamie and her boyfriend decided to move out on their own. At the time of the study, Jamie, her boyfriend, and their two boys were living in their own home. She stated the first time she got pregnant she was not trying to prevent the pregnancy. Her second son was a surprise, as she was on birth control. Jamie became pregnant with her third child during her last semester of her senior year. At the time of the study she was working and attending high school full time.

### **Themes**

As noted in the previous chapter, I gathered and generated data for this study by conducting semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with each participant and two in-person focus groups. I gathered data through field notes that were taken during the interviews and focus groups to record my observations of those events. I also observed the informants in the hallways of Valor High School. I used constant comparative data analysis, which revealed four major themes related to the educational experiences of these pregnant and mothering teens: school relationships, support systems, balance, and motivation.

*School relationships* encompass the factors surrounding various relationships within the school community. These relationships were between the participants and various people and groups at the school, including peers, teachers, staff, and

administration. Each of these different relationships had an integral impact on the educational experiences of the participants in this study.

*Support systems* included supports inside and outside of school, including formal programs such as the baby bus (a school bus that is equipped with car seats for babies next to a seat for the mother), school daycare, a food backpack program, parenting classes, five-minute hall passes, and homebound services. Outside-of-school resources involved maternal and paternal family support. All of these services proved to have a significant impact on the participants' educational experiences.

The next theme that emerged from the data in this study was *balance*. The ability of the pregnant and mothering teens to balance time within and outside of school was perceived as a critical piece of their educational experience and was of the utmost importance to these women. They also had to balance their new body shapes and functions within the school setting—there are many physiological effects of being pregnant that must be reconciled. The participants also balanced their reactions to socially constructed views of pregnancy. These pregnant and mothering teens were very aware of how society perceived them and they created balance in order to persevere in the shadow of that social construction. A variety of coping skills helped foster their success. The participants also had a sense of pride; they knew that they had accomplished things that many of their peers could not. These four subcategories were all part of the balance theme; these were pieces of their lives they had balanced in some shape or form.



The final theme that emerged was *motivation*. The participants all graduated or were enrolled in either the Recommended High School or Distinguished Achievement School Program, even though they could have easily changed to the Minimum High School Program. They sought, however, to ensure that they were ready for a university by pursuing one of the more rigorous plans. Their motivation helped keep them on their chosen paths. They had long range plans that helped to keep them focused on their goals.

In the sections that follow, I introduce the above themes using the voices of the pregnant and mothering teens. Then, in Chapter V, I further elaborate on the themes and offer resiliency theory as an analytic tool for understanding the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens.

### **School Relationships**

School relationships were vital to these pregnant and mothering teens who spent at least eight hours a day in school. The interactions and the relationships they built or lost at school played an integral role in their completion of high school. These school relationships were broken down into relationships with peers, relationships with teachers, and relationships with administrators and school staff.

**Relationships with peers.** Relationships with their peers had a lasting impact on all of the participants. In particular, they all experienced a mix of reactions from their peers about their pregnancies. According to their interviews, all of the young women lost friends and were shunned due to their pregnancies. Lynn, who was pregnant the second semester of her senior year, shared her experience:

The people who were once my friends treated me like I had a disease, and they treated me like they would get pregnant too. I started my senior year with all kinds of friends and ended it with none.

Karina had similar experiences. When asked if people treated her differently, she said:

Oh yes, a lot of them. I actually lost several friends because of that and I had one friend that always stood by me, she was always so supportive, she got me everything I needed, really when I needed her, she was always there. Even ‘til now she is always by my side, every time I need her she is always there for me. Umm, I lost most of my friends, they stopped talking to me. Even whenever it was summer and I had nothing to do. They would say “Oh, I changed my number.” They would tell me that, “you never have time, oh okay; we will call you next time we do something.” So I finally noticed that I didn’t need friends like that, so I just stopped talking to them.

Jamie also described similar experiences when asked if her peers treated her differently:

Yes, I get talked about a lot. But being the person I am, I could care less, but I know a lot of teen moms get offended by what they say. The reason I am the way I am is because of my support system. My junior year I was going to drop out, and [my baby’s father] and my mom said no, get my ass back in school. A lot of these teen moms don’t have that. Their baby daddies leave them and they have no one.

Likewise, Jessica said, “Yeah, lots of them [treated me differently]. Lots of them stopped talking to me, lots of them disappeared.” Mary noted that “some have positive thoughts, some are pretty negative.” During the focus group discussion, Jamie added:

Some did [treat me differently], most of them did, but I mean, I just ignored them. There was nothing I could do. It’s not like I could say anything to them. You don’t fit in and now you don’t have any friends.

The participants all expressed experiencing isolation and rejection from their peer groups. Two participants even identified these negative experiences with their peers as the hardest part of being a pregnant or mothering teen in high school. Lynn described the reactions she got from others:

[Y]ou don’t just get dirty looks from staff, you get them from other people. You have to sit there and listen to your classmates snicker behind your back and obviously they always question who the father of the baby is. And it is just drama, high school drama. It makes an already difficult situation even more difficult.

Jessica explained that the hardest part was “the people pushing you around, always looking at you, and always having a comment to say.” During the focus group interview, the difficulties of peer interactions came up again. Jessica stated, “sometimes you don’t feel good, all of the stares, and all of the people talking about you.” Jamie also explained that when there were fights in the halls, her husband would push people back to protect her from the crowds. Karina stated, “when the bell is ringing, people run to their classes and they would run into me.” Not only did the participants express that

their peers made comments and stared at them, but also expressed that they had negative physical interactions with their peers.

The participants explained that being isolated, bullied, and physically threatened did not create an environment conducive to learning. As they told me their stories, I believed I could see the heartbreak in their eyes about losing their friends. As a researcher, I knew this isolation and bullying was a significant piece to this project, and so I began watching for these behaviors in the classroom and in the hallways. A few days after our focus group discussion, I saw a young woman who was pregnant walk by and then witnessed other students pointing and snickering from afar. I had never seen—or rather, I had never noticed—this behavior until I began conducting this research study. These peer relationships seem to have a long and wide path of influence on the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens.

**Relationships with teachers.** The second school relationship explored in this project was the participants' relationship with teachers. Teachers can be influential in the lives of their students (Yoon, 2002). Therefore, their relationship with pregnant and mothering teens can have an impact on their educational experiences. When the participants were asked if they believed their teachers thought they should drop out of high school, they had mixed responses. Lynn and Karina stated no. Jessica and Mary said no, and both indicated that they were encouraged, supported, and pushed forward by their teachers. Jamie stated, "I haven't had any [teachers who said I should drop out] this year, but I have before." The fact that Jamie had even one teacher who indicated it was a good idea or supported her dropping out is problematic for the educational system.

Thus, there would seem to exist a question of whether or not teachers have negative opinions of pregnant and mothering teens, and if these opinions affect how they teach these students.

When the participants were asked if they believed their teachers had opinions about their status as pregnant or mothering teens, again there were mixed responses. Jessica merely stated “No.” Jamie said yes, but did not elaborate. Lynn also said yes, and she continued:

When I was pregnant, my government teacher didn’t care that I was pregnant, she was like, “You made the bed you made, so now you have to deal with it.” To an extent it was refreshing because I wasn’t treated differently, but it was also a lot harder because you have to miss school because of doctor’s appointments and stuff. You need someone that will work with you.

Karina said she felt like “some teachers do judge you, but most of the teachers I had were real [considerate] because some of them were teen moms themselves. I did have a better relationship with them because they understood me.” Mary did not think her teachers had an opinion about the subject:

I have told all of my teachers, gave them hints, I don’t really just say it. They say, “Oh, you have a kid.” It is interesting. I don’t think they think anyone should drop out. Especially senior teachers, they are like, “Oh, stay in school.”

Each participant had a different answer about whether or not she believed her teachers treated her differently. Jessica, for example, said that she felt she was not treated differently. The other participants felt they had received different treatment, but

their explanation of those differences varied. Jamie felt that the way she was treated differently was positive and based on her maturity level: “Yes, thanks to God, most of the teachers who have treated me differently...because I am way more mature than the other kids.” Mary stated, “I think yeah, some do. But not in a bad way, but maybe they let me get away with more things, as weird as that sounds. I always try to turn things in on time, but sometimes it’s like, ‘Oh God.’” Lynn stated, “Yes, some of them were nicer and they kind of babied me a little, and all I wanted to do was fit in. And some weren’t so nice, the bigger I got, the looks tell you, they don’t have to say it or express it, but their looks tell you.” Karina explained the different way she was treated by her volleyball coach:

Well, some did treat me differently, especially my coaches treated me differently because since I was in the volleyball team, they always thought, I guess nobody expected it from me. And I guess they saw that year that I had gotten pregnant. I had told them, they looked like I had let them down, and they didn’t seem—I mean, they understood and they were okay with it, but I felt like I had let them down. I didn’t feel the same as when I had started volleyball. Like, I could tell they were different; before they would always say hi to me, now they would pass by and not say anything to me.

During the focus group meetings the group echoed some of the thoughts from the interviews. Karina stated:

Some do, some do criticize you. I felt like some did criticize me by the way they look at me, especially because I was a sophomore, even though I made good

grades and stuff. But, “Oh, yeah, she is still pregnant and she is going to be a mom, she still isn’t going to amount to anything.” It wasn’t just what they said, it was their looks.

Likewise, Jessica added, “their looks said a lot. Different looks say a lot.”

Some of the participants expressed that they felt their teachers had opinions about them being pregnant or mothering teens. Thus, I asked the participants whether they thought these opinions influenced how they were taught. Lynn believed they did have an effect: “If they don’t necessarily agree with how you are, they aren’t going to give you the help you need.” Mary had a different take on it, pointing to the positive effects of her strength as a mother: “They had positive thoughts about me because they knew me first as a student and then as a mother. Then they associated me with, ‘Oh, she is a good mom.’” Karina’s experience was marked by a subtle difference in one teacher’s attitude:

Yeah, [a] little bit, I feel like I did have a teacher my sophomore year, like, she did judge me, but I didn’t pay much attention to her. But I had the best grades in her class, so that made her seem pretty dumb. I don’t know, I just had that feeling. I felt like she was treating me differently than other students.

Everything I would say, she would be like, “Whatever.” But if another student said something, like, she would be like, “Oh, okay, yeah.” She would treat them nicer. I always had an A in her class, and everyone else was failing.

Jamie described an interaction with a teacher that left her feeling particularly judged:

Maybe a teacher doesn't like the fact that I am a teen mom, and maybe they will be harder on me. I hate it when they feel sorry for me. I should learn how to manage it. Don't sit there and judge me just because I am a teen mom. This year I had a teacher make a smart remark to me. She was pregnant and she was scratching and I told her not to scratch and she said, "I am not scratching, I am rubbing, and a teen mom is the last person I will ever take advice from." And I didn't say anything; I got up, got my stuff, and left the room. Saying that in front of all of those people was really rude. I know I am a teen mom. She apologized, but whatever.

In sum, the participants had mixed thoughts about whether or not their teachers' opinions affected the way they were taught. Some expressed that the actions and words of a few teachers spoke volumes. Overall, however, they felt that the actions and words of their teachers affected how they were taught in both positive and negative ways.

Next, I asked the participants if there was anything that they wished their teachers knew about their experience. Karina said she wished they knew how difficult it was both academically and socially:

How difficult it is to keep up with the schoolwork and not knowing how hard it is because of what everyone says behind your back. Trying to keep up with school and get it in on time, trying to study for a test. Whenever you try and do something, the baby starts crying, or they want to wake up and play, and you can't get anything done.



Lynn said she wished she had not kept her pregnancy a secret for as long as she did: “I wish I would have told them when I knew, because it would have made the transition easier. And I felt like my schoolwork really suffered. I kept it secret until the bump started showing.” Jessica said she wished her teachers knew “some problems, if I was going through some problems, more their understanding. I think I should be able to tell them, like if there was a teacher that I could actually trust, then I could tell them.” It seemed that Jessica wanted to feel like she could safely speak to her teachers and let them know what problems she was having outside of school. She wanted someone at school to be able to confide in. Jamie stated she wished her teachers simply knew *her* better:

I feel like often, just because I am a teen mom, just because of that stupid show [*Teen Mom* on MTV], they feel like I am [an] unexperienced and immature mom. Because of what I have been through I would rather they take the time to get to know me. Because I have been through so much and I am not like those crazy teen moms you see on TV.

Each of the participants individually expressed that she had things that she wished her teachers knew about her; when the women were asked as a group, the response was much the same. For example, one participant said:

I went through a lot with my family, two teachers that work with pregnant and mothering teens. They were supportive. I had a Spanish teacher [for whom] I wrote a story about my life, so he knew what all I had been through and [would] help me out.

Each of the participants expressed her desire to be able to build a relationship with her teachers. The participants felt the need to be able to trust and depend on their teachers. They needed someone to confide in at school, a safe adult to speak with.

Next, it was necessary to explore what the participants felt their teachers could have done to help them. Jamie said she needed help from her teachers to “understand me. I am not saying let me fly by either, but try to work with me.” Karina stated that her teachers could have helped her by “having extra time to get things done.” She explained:

I feel like they could have been more open towards me, I feel like they were trying to shut me out sometimes. Sometimes I didn’t feel like part of the class sometimes. I feel like when we did group things, and we had to do a demonstration, they wouldn’t let me do it because they thought I was too big and pregnant, they thought I would fall.

When asked how teachers could help her, Jessica said that most teachers were understanding, and that was helpful, but that some teachers “didn’t care”:

The teachers need to care. Like, with some teachers, if I needed an extra day for an assignment they would actually give it to me. You know how some teachers take off points for being late? They wouldn’t. They would give me more time if I needed it, if I needed help, to actually help [answer questions and explain information], they would actually help out. Some teachers wouldn’t even help you out. Some teachers would help anyone; some teachers only didn’t help the pregnant one.

Lynn expressed her desire to have her teachers “help us plan for the future”:

I feel like they don't focus that much about the future. All they care about are standardized tests. I feel like the biggest teacher hater ever...I think a lot of it was the school counselor. When I found out I was pregnant [and told the counselor at school], she spoke to me like my life was over. Instead of giving me alternative outlooks on what I could do to pursue better education, they just said, “Oh I am so sorry.” Like, my life isn't over yet, I can still keep breathing. It would have been nice to help me out with those things. Your life is more difficult, but it is not over...My teachers would help me if I ever needed help with school. They would be there if I needed extra tutoring; they would work around their schedule and my schedule. Whenever I was missing a lot of school due to doctor's appointments, I had some teachers who would let me take quizzes and make up work so that I wouldn't fail.

Each of the participants said there were things that her teachers could have done in order to help her be successful. At the focus group meeting, the participants expressed a need for “support, not so much homework, and to be treated the same.” They wanted to be treated the same as the other students; however, at the same time they also needed some flexibility from their teachers.

**Relationships with school staff.** Also important were the relationships between the participants and school staff, like assistant principals, the principal, counselors, and secretaries. Although the interactions with these staff members were not as frequent, they did exist and needed to be explored. When asked if they thought the school staff

had opinions about them being pregnant or mothering teens, only Jessica said, “not that I know of.” Mary said she was usually not in the office, but she said that “the counselors and a few ladies in the front...usually go to the fire drills with the babies, so I think they are understanding of our situation.” And Lynn explained that she thought the staff had “their own opinions towards teen moms, especially those that don’t fight for their education, but I don’t think that they let that get in the way of their opinions of the students themselves.”

Jamie said she did believe the staff had opinions. For example, she talked about an experience with an assistant principal: “I went off on her. Some friends were touching my stomach and she asked why we thought it was so amusing that I was pregnant.” Karina similarly noted that she felt like one assistant principal “did kind of look at me wrong whenever she did see that I was pregnant, so I did always feel awkward walking by her in the halls.” In contrast, however, another of the assistant principals “was so nice, she always asked about my baby, she asked how he was doing, how big was he. She was always very nice.” During a focus group, Jessica expressed that she felt like one assistant principal had an opinion, but that she “would just ignore her,” but another “always asked me how the baby was, and made sure I was okay.”

With regards to counselors, Lynn brought up an interesting interaction. Only one counselor at Valor High School oversaw the pregnant and mothering teens. Teachers were told that when they learn a student is expecting they are to refer that student to that counselor. Lynn expressed that when she met with the counselor who handled the pregnant and mothering teens that she immediately felt “doomed.” She felt like the

counselor spoke to her like her life was over, and this made Lynn uncomfortable and she felt it set the tone for the school. This counselor may have perceived herself as being empathetic, but for Lynn the interaction set a negative tone for the pregnancy.

In this subsection, I have relayed the voices of the participants in this study with regards to their relationships with different people within the school, including peers, teachers, and school staff. Each of these relationships had an impact on the participants. The next subsection will examine the support systems that impacted the participants in this study.

### **Support Systems**

Support systems have a role in keeping pregnant and mothering teens in high school, and the participants all described their importance to their educational success. The support systems examined in this study originated from two areas: within school and outside of school. I will first explore support systems within the school.

**In-school support systems.** Valor High School had a variety of support systems for pregnant and mothering teens. The school offered all of the pregnant and mothering teen's childcare while they were at school and after school if they needed to stay for tutoring. They also provided a "baby bus" that brought the mothers and their children to and from school daily. The pregnant teens were allowed six weeks of homebound education after they delivered. All pregnant teens were required to take a parenting class where they were followed by a social worker who provided a variety of services to the young women. The social worker helped the students to sign up for services provided outside of school, like WIC, and to file for child support. The social worker also visited the parenting class regularly to provide support for the students, and spoke with the

pregnant teens during the class, answering various questions and providing information in regards to child labor.

Through the parenting class and daycare, the teens could receive a backpack filled with food to take home over the weekend. The mother and father, if both were enrolled at Valor High School, were required to take a child development class. If a student requested a mentor, then the school provided one. The pregnant teens at Valor High School also received a five-minute leave from class called “early pass.” Valor High School had eight counselors, assigned to students by last name. The participants were followed by a specific counselor with a smaller caseload, and the school provided a variety of support systems. The participants generated the list of programs and their descriptions shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
*In-School Support Programs*

<i>Program</i>	<i>Description of services provided to participants</i>
Childcare	Daycare services provided at school to teen parents. If the father is not a student then child support must be filed on the father for the child to be able to attend the school daycare.
Homebound	Students who are medically unable to attend school receive homebound services. A teacher visits the student’s home a minimum of once a week and provides work and instruction.
Home Access Center	Computer system that allows all students to log in and view their grades.
Teacher Email	Students have access to their teachers via email. All students may email their teachers questions and problems, or to ask for work.

Table 3 Continued

<i>Program</i>	<i>Description of services provided to participants</i>
Parenting Class	All mothers at Valor High School are required to take a parenting class. The class had been mandatory for mothers and fathers, if the father was a student at Valor High School; however, there was an issue with multiple mothers having the same father of their babies, so they changed the class to only being a requirement for mothers.
Transportation Services	The school district for Valor High School provides a baby bus to transport mothers and their children to and from school.
Food Backpack	A backpack with food that pregnant or mothering teens can take home over the weekend to ensure they have something to eat. This is a teacher-driven program and is unique to one teacher.
Specific Counselor	All of the pregnant and mothering teens are followed by one specific counselor. This counselor has fewer students assigned to her, so she can give her students more individual attention.
Mentor	Pregnant and mothering teens can have a teacher mentor if they request one. Teacher mentors talk to students regularly and serve as an additional support system and advocate.
Social Worker	A social worker attends the parenting class regularly. She serves as a liaison to services available outside of school for pregnant and mothering teens.

Through their interviews and focus group discussions, the participants outlined most, if not all, of these services. They also discussed how these support systems helped them achieve their goals. Jamie, for example, had two children, one of whom was born her freshman year, and she utilized a number of support systems within Valor High School for four years:

Childcare services, homebound, Home Access Center, and teacher email. I don't have a computer at home, but I have a library. Parenting classes are really helpful; I have seen the social worker help with other moms. Contraception. When I was on homebound, I had a lot of my teachers were communicating a lot with me through emails. Students can stay out six weeks. The fact that they provide childcare services for me is a huge thing.

Karina also used many of the support systems offered to her. Her son was born her sophomore year, so she utilized these services for three years:

Daycare was really helpful, mentor, backpack of food, caring teachers, and assistant principals, someone to talk to. I got a mentor because I told the counselor, because they said they would do things to help me out. So I got a mentor. They also used to give out every week a backpack. They would give it to me on Friday filled with food, then I brought it back on Monday. They had it in the daycare and maybe a classroom. The baby bus, I think I would have missed a lot of school without that. I could take him to school at six weeks old that was good. I didn't have to wait until he was a year or something.

Jessica gave birth the summer before her senior year, and her mother kept her child while she was at Valor High School. Therefore, Jessica did not use as many of the support systems offered. She did find the parenting class helpful, and said she thought, "more schools should have that class." Lynn became pregnant the last month of the first semester of her senior year at Valor High School, and did not mother while enrolled. Perhaps as a result, her perspective was somewhat different:



I don't think they should have changed anything; they did help me out the best they could to make up hours. And they were understanding. But in the end I am the one that got pregnant in high school, so they shouldn't have to adapt to me.

In sum, Valor High School offered a variety of support systems for pregnant and mothering teens, the majority of which were driven by the school district. High schools in other districts are not required to have these support systems. Many districts provide only the requirements outlined by Title IX. The participants in this study expressed that the support systems within Valor High School positively impacted their educational experiences. Next, I explore the importance of the support systems that the study participants accessed outside of school.

**Outside-of-school support systems.** The participants indicated that they benefited not only from support systems within their high school but also from a variety of supports outside of school. Parents and extended family were especially important in this regard. Jamie expressed, for example, that “my dad doesn’t help me, my mom supports me all the way.” Lynn said that her parents did not help her out, but now her mother “is really there for me when it comes to college.” Jessica explained that her parents helped her “a lot. They pushed me. My mom would say, ‘You better finish,’ and my dad would say, ‘Don’t ruin your life by not finishing school.’” Karina identified her supports as “my parents, my boyfriend, my boyfriend’s parents. My boyfriend’s parents help me out a lot, especially when [my son] was small. Since I live with my boyfriend’s family, they support me, they have always been there for me since the beginning.”

All of the participants had lived with their boyfriends' families at some point, although Jamie's time doing so was short. Each relied heavily on this extended family. Jessica said that her father kicked her out when he found out she was pregnant. Karina never told me her entire story, but from what she said, it seems feasible that she was kicked out as well. Lynn already lived with her boyfriend when she got pregnant. Mary lived with her boyfriend's family, although she did not explain how that living arrangement occurred. Jamie lived with her mother, then with her boyfriend at his father's home, and at the conclusion of the study she and her boyfriend had their own home. The participants indicated that the support outside of school was necessary in order to help get their schoolwork done. Notably, however, the participants indicated that the boyfriends' families pushed the young men educationally, yet they were indifferent to the women's education.

### **Balance**

The theme of balance includes roles, coping, social construction, and physiological effects. The participants in this study discussed how they had to navigate each of these aspects of their lives while being pregnant and mothering teens.

**Roles.** During the interviews and focus group meetings, the participants were specifically asked about how they balanced going to school and being pregnant, as well as going to school and being mothers. Each participant spoke of how she balanced her roles of being a student and being pregnant, and/or of being a student and being a mother. Lynn noted the importance of "prioritizing and realizing that getting a good education and not doing just enough to get by was important." She acknowledged that

balancing everything was difficult: “You definitely lose sleep, but it is worth it when you realize your goals are being made and you spend time with the little ones.”

Karina explained that it was less difficult to balance her pregnancy with schoolwork, but “as a mother it is a lot harder.” She continued:

You have to deal with school, and if you have a lot of homework or things to do and then you are by yourself, it gets hard trying to watch a baby and doing your homework at the same time. [While I was pregnant] I guess I kind of had a schedule. I would just go to school, go home go to sleep for about two hours, get up do homework, and then go to bed around ten. [Being a mom] it is harder, it is a lot harder, especially since I am not working and it is still kind of hard on me. See, when I get home, I have to wait ‘til five to actually start doing my homework. Because that’s when my baby’s grandma, grandpa, and dad get home, so I have to wait ‘til five. So we just play until five and get him something to eat. Then when it’s five, I can do my homework and get everything I need to get done for school.

In contrast, Jamie focused on the challenge of being pregnant, in part “because you have so many appointments.” Later in the conversation, she, too, pointed to the additional challenges of motherhood:

It’s hard ‘cause there are sometimes they get sick and sometimes you get so overwhelmed and you just don’t want to get out of bed. There is not enough time for everything sometimes. It’s always a win/lose situation, never a win/win.

There is a doctor's appointment you have to get to, always something. Like with me working, tomorrow I have to take off work for a bit to take him to the doctor. She explained that she found ways to balance these competing responsibilities because she was able to look ahead and remain optimistic:

Sometimes I want to give up, especially this year because there are so many fees and stuff. But, if I drop out, what am I going to tell my kids in the future? It is better to struggle now, rather than take things easy now and then still struggle later on. I look at things optimistically. I set times for stuff. So, like, since it is my day off, I had to come over here with you, then when I need to leave here by 4:30, so I can work on a project for Ms. Smith. I have to call her [project partner] when I am done, go pick her up and go to the library. Then I have to be home by seven so I can bathe them and get them to bed. I am very positive. I have always been that way. Instead of looking at the negative perspective, I try and look at the positive perspective, because thinking negative doesn't get you anywhere. It is like sitting there and being angry about something. It is useless, already happened, can't go back.

Jessica explained that she was able to balance her roles by relying on the people around her for help:

It really wasn't that hard. I mean, people may look at me differently probably, but it wasn't a concern for me. Getting the help I needed from my parents, from the baby's dad and all that [helped me to balance]. You have to be focused on school and the baby, and sometimes the baby takes that time. You need to put

more focus on the baby now. There is more work and sometimes you have to leave school because of your baby. You have to try fitting everything into a different schedule now. Try and focus on them equally but more on the baby.

Mary found balance by segmenting her responsibilities, focusing on school while she was at school, and motherhood when she was at home:

Just the thought of not knowing what was going to happen [being pregnant].

You have so many things, homework, lessons, that you have to focus on. Now they are running all around, [so] you have to be constant, you have to be there for them. I try to keep them separate to be honest—when I am at school I am in school, more focused on the task at hand, what is at stake. Just being around family, they would help me, they would push me to keep going.

In the focus group, the teens discussed similar issues, noting the difficulty in balancing school and pregnancy and/or motherhood. As one participant noted, it's not always possible, and something has to give: "When you are a mom, you have to find someone to watch your baby. And if they aren't there, you have to cancel school or say, 'I'll be there late,' or find someone else." Overall, the participants expressed how difficult it was balancing their roles as mothers and students, and each spoke of how she had to rely on her support systems to help her navigate through.

**Coping.** In order to complete high school, the participants needed the skills to cope with their life situations. Each of the participants shared how she was faced with a multitude of obstacles every day, and how she somehow managed to cope and persevere. Jamie, for example, said, "I have been through a lot of situations [that] make me who I

am now. Being a mom, being a single mom, has [taught] me a lot of things.” Mary asserted, “I know myself, I know what kind of goals I have in mind, so I don’t let it [other’s opinions of me] bother me as much.” Jessica said she does not “worry about them, I just worry about my stuff.” In a similar vein, Lynn said she takes challenges “day by day. I think that’s my goal. I take each thing on as it comes.” Karina’s coping strategy was rooted in her determination “to prove them wrong...I just try to keep going to school.” During the focus group, the participants were a bit more concrete, stating that “being more organized and finding time for everything” was how they coped.

**Physiological effects.** Two of the participants described the physiological effects that influenced their experiences as pregnant and mothering teens. Lynn, for example, joked about the challenge of “fitting into the desks,” but then continued:

A lot of it was being able to stay awake from being so tired. And having the last trimester just getting from class, you never realize how far it is until you have to waddle. Every day I left your class I had to go to the portables [classrooms not located within the main body of the school]. Sometimes the teachers don’t let you go potty. Yes, it is hard getting to class on time, especially when they are on two opposite ends of the building. And then juggling morning sickness—that was a challenge.

Karina described the challenge as a progression: “At the beginning, no, it’s not hard, but as you get farther into your pregnancy...you feel lazier. You don’t want to get up, you feel lazy and slow.” During the group discussions the participants stated that the hardest

things about being pregnant or mothering in school were being “tired,” “sleepy,” and “lazy,” and that it was “hard to catch up,” or “bring up low grades.”

Through our conversations, some participants indicated that even though they were issued a pass to leave class five minutes early and a restroom pass, many teachers wanted to see the pass every day, or they would encourage the participants to wait so they did not miss important information. The participants expressed that missing class due to needing to use the restroom, being late for class due to inability to walk quickly, or leaving early for another class did have an effect on their educational experiences. They felt pressured to stay in class and to ignore the needs of their pregnant bodies. Next, I explore the different factors that motivated the participants to persist to graduation.

### **Motivation and Persistence**

Each participant identified a source of motivation to continue with her education, although these sources differed. This section on motivation contains responses that were about these motivations, as well as the teens’ long range plans, pride, and whether or not they contemplated dropping out of high school.

**Motivation.** The participants each cited a different source of motivation, although all included their children as having a role. Jessica, for instance, said that her motivation for finishing school was to achieve something “better for myself and my family.” She persisted for her daughter, “and for myself, not just for her, but also for myself.” She continued:

It makes me feel good knowing that I want to have a better future for me and for her. I was always putting effort in my classes, there are lots of students who would fail, and I was always passing them.

Likewise, Karina said her son was her “biggest motivation, I just want the best for him. That is the main thing. I do want to prove people wrong, but I want him to see later on what I went through so he doesn’t make the same mistake [being a teenage parent].” She explained that to ensure she achieved these goals, she sought balance: “I tried to do the most I could. But I didn’t try to do too much either. Like my junior year I started out with all K-level [advanced level] classes but I had to drop two because they were getting to be too much.” Mary also said that her motivation was her daughter, “to give her a better life.”

Some of the participants talked about the importance of other family members. Jamie noted, “Besides my kids, my mom, and their dad, Eddie, my kids. They motivate me.” Lynn said that her son’s father influenced her: “When we got together, he knew how important my future was to me and that I wouldn’t get anywhere without my education.”

In some cases, the participants’ motivation was connected to a desire to disprove stereotypes about teen mothers or exceed expectations that the participants knew others had. For example, Jamie was determined “to prove to others that just because I am a teen mom, I am not going to hold back. I am going to accomplish, I am going to go beyond what I thought I could do.” And Lynn resolved “not to be a stereotype.” She said she remembered how hard it was for her own mother, who was a teen mom and



dropped out of high school. Lynn was the first in her family to graduate from high school:

My brother dropped out twice, my dad dropped out, my mom dropped out. The journey was hard, but I did it....I guess I just felt like I needed to do it. I wasn't just trying to prove it to myself that I could do it, but I was trying to prove it to my mom and everyone else that I could do it. Because when I found out I was pregnant, my whole family turned against me. It wasn't just like people at school, everyone. So I wanted to prove to everyone that my life wasn't over, that I would juggle both, that yes it would be hard, but it was the right thing to do. I wanted my options to be unlimited. I wanted to be able to do anything when I graduated.

During their focus group discussions, the group once again answered that their babies provided a source of motivation for finishing high school. Each of the participants identified her child as a motivating factor in their completion of high school.

**Social construction.** A social construct is “a social mechanism, phenomenon, or category created and developed by society; a perception of an individual, group, or idea that is ‘constructed’ through cultural or social practice” (Dictionary.com, 2015). As a society we have constructed a negative definition of what we believe a pregnant or mothering teen to be. As discussed in Chapter II, Wilson and Huntington (2005) asserted that pregnant and mothering teens are vilified due to the perceived rejection of middle class norms and values. Indeed, on a daily basis, these study participants faced members of society who judged them and made assumptions about them. Jessica, for

example, was aware the some people “don’t believe that we can do it.” She asserted, “some of us can; and others of us can’t, because they don’t have the help. If they had help they could probably do it.” Jessica said she wished that these people knew “that it is not easy, but that if they would help out more, it would be more helpful knowing that we have the support.”

Karina also addressed the importance of recognizing the diversity of experience among pregnant and mothering teens. She explained:

We are not all the same. I feel like it is sad that people feel that way, that they don’t have people supporting them, like I have people supporting me. They are just bringing them down. I don’t think that girls should drop out. I think they should prove them wrong, because that is what most people want to see—“Oh, she is going to drop out”—and that is what my family thought about me too. And that really hurt because it felt like they were giving up on me. So I always thought that if I go to school and I am going to college and I know what I am going to do....I know if I prove them wrong, they will be like, “Whoa, she actually did it.”

Karina’s family’s expectations were at least in part based on their experience with her brother’s girlfriend, who got pregnant and “she just left after high school and stopped. She graduated on the Minimum plan, and after that she didn’t do anything.... [and] I guess they expect the same thing from me.” Karina is determined, however, “to be somebody in life. That is my point, I am not going to be like any other person. I know what I am going to be.”

Similar to Karina, Mary was determined to defy the limited expectations that she perceived others had of her:

I think it kind of makes me angry, because they are making a conclusion, just because you are a mom you are going to drop out. Ummmm, no. The goals that I want to reach, I just don't want to be one of those moms. I mean, it looks bad to me.

Lynn was already in college at the time of the study, and even though she had successfully graduated from high school, she thought that "a lot of people don't think I graduated. They think I got my GED or I did something. They don't think that I worked for and went to all of my classes and studied as hard as I did." This frustrated Lynn because of how hard she had worked. As she explained it, "I worked harder than some of the girls not having babies, and...I think I should get credit." Like other participants, she was determined to defy the stereotypes:

I hate how students feel like how if you are friends with someone who is pregnant it is like a disease. I hate how students and people see you and see you being pregnant and think that you are a slut. Nothing is 100% effective. I feel like I should wear a "scarlet A." For me, my mom had her first son at 15 and she did the whole adoption and she dropped out of high school and I didn't want to be like that. I didn't want to be the stereotype, and I knew I had more in me than to just get by.

Jamie was also very aware of how she was viewed by others, and was similarly determined to succeed as a result:

Just because we are pregnant at a young age, people start looking at us wrong and judging us. They shouldn't open their mouths and start running them if they don't know what it is like; they should try and look at it from our point of view. I personally do sometimes take things [as] offensive. They all have us as horrible persons who can't take care of their kids....I know how I am, I know I take good care of my kids, and I am responsible. I take good care of my kids. I guess my kids actually motivate me to do better. I don't see them as an obstacle, there is a certain circumstance that makes certain things harder, but I don't see them as an obstacle. Rather than being, like, rough for me, it is something that motivates me to go high, to achieve more, to do better.

The participants all expressed a need for society to treat them as individuals. They dealt with their reactions to society in different manners. During their group discussions, Jessica stated:

I try harder. I didn't want to. I wanted a better future for my daughter, so I thought about her instead of myself. I feel good, I am not going to be one of those just working at McDonald's or a little job. My mom did it for me and I am on top now. They should stop thinking that all teen moms are like that.

Everyone is different.

Thus, each participant had a different way of coping with how society and others "saw" her. Each expressed her desire not to be "that girl." As mothering teens, they did not want to be perceived negatively, which is how they are typically constructed. In other words, they did not want to be seen as irresponsible, as dropouts, or as bad

mothers. They wanted to be responsible and complete high school. They wanted to be seen as good mothers, and to change the perceptions of teen moms. The participants were driven to be good mothers and had long range plans for how they would achieve their goals.

**Long range plans.** Each of the participants had long range goals—specific things she wanted to accomplish after high school—and pregnancies and motherhood had impacted those goals. Mary lamented that “I won’t be able to live in a dorm; I won’t be able to go away to another city.” Jessica said her original intention had been to transition directly from high school to college, but that she had to re-evaluate those plans:

Since I have her, I have to check my schedule and make sure I have time to actually do the things and all that. I wanna like, when she goes to school, I want to be in classes, I want to study medicine. Before being pregnant, I never really thought about it yet [going to college], I more thought about it now. Now it’s my senior year, and the plans I have now haven’t changed. I am going to start off at community college and then transfer to a university. I am going to study medicine; I want to be a pediatric nurse.

Karina’s plans had changed in a similar way:

[My plans changed] a little because after high school I did want to go to a big university, but now I will most likely go to community college and see what happens. Where I wanted to go was what changed. I already had a plan; I

wanted to go to a university or something—a bigger school, like a university. I didn't want to go to a little school. Now I am going to a pharmacy tech school. In contrast to Jessica and Karina, Lynn had very specific long range plans that changed significantly when she found out she was pregnant. As described earlier, she had plans to “become a soldier.” She enlisted and then found out she was pregnant. As a result, she is now instead attending the University of Phoenix, studying healthcare administration.

Jamie's long range plans also changed significantly, albeit in a different way. Her baby became a source of motivation to pursue college:

I would be the girl that skipped school. If I was at school, I was in DMC [Discipline Management Class], or going off on teachers. I didn't want to go to college. A baby can change you for the good or bad. I didn't want to finish school, I wanted to drop out. But now, since they are here, I want to be successful for them. I plan on doing my basics at community college and then going to the university to study law. I am hoping to become a judge.

During the focus group discussions, the participants once again described how their long range plans had changed as a direct result of their pregnancies. Even though their long range plans had changed, the participants still had goals and were actively pursuing them. The changes in their plans did not negatively impact their pride in their successful completion of high school—a topic discussed in the next subsection.

**Pride.** Graduation on the Recommended High School or Distinguished Achievement Program is not a task that all students can accomplish. Only 68.7% of the

2012 graduating class at Valor High School graduated on one of these plans (Texas Education Agency, 2013), and each of the participants in the study accomplished this while pregnant or as a mothering teen. I asked specifically if they were proud of themselves or if they were aware of the significance of their accomplishments. Lynn, Mary, and Jessica all simply said “yes,” they were proud. Jamie said “yes, [she was] very” proud of herself. And Karina said “yeah, I am. I mean, I don’t want to stop going to school just because I had a baby.” I would describe each of their responses as very low key and understated. All of the participants were all proud, though none of them were boastful.

**Change of graduation plans or dropping out.** High school graduation plans at Valor High School and in other districts within Texas are largely student driven. All students begin high school on the Recommended or Distinguish Achievement High School plans, and after they turn 16 they can choose to remain on those plans or drop to the Minimum plan at any time prior to graduation. Therefore, it was important to ask the participants if they planned to change their graduation plans, or if they had contemplated dropping out. Lynn graduated prior to starting the study, so her answers were retrospective.

Most of the participants said they had not considered switching plans or dropping out altogether. Mary stated that she would not switch plans: “That scares me because I want to go to a university, so I can’t really [switch plans]. In the beginning of this year, this is too much, because I have a job, it was just too much, I did contemplate dropping out.” Karina stated dropping out or switching to the Minimum High School Program

“was the last thing on my mind. I didn’t want to do that. Never.” Similarly, Lynn said, “it never crossed my mind because dropping out in today’s society, the chances of getting a job that will benefit you and your family, especially your child, are near none.” Jessica also said she had not thought about dropping out or switching plans. Jamie’s responses differed. She had thought about dropping out, and she did not yet know if she would switch to the Minimum plan. She was the only participant in the study who had not yet graduated from high school.

Each participant in this study made a choice to stay on the Recommended or Distinguished high school graduation plan. Some had fleeting moments when they contemplated dropping out or switching to the minimum plan; however, each chose to continue on. Each decided she wanted the more rigorous program and either successfully completed high school, or was on the path to doing so.

### **Summary**

Chapter IV has been dedicated to providing a voice to the participants of this study. I compiled responses to interviews and focus groups, and used a constant comparative method to identify themes. After identifying the themes, I organized all of the participant responses with regards to the themes. The goal was to allow the reader to experience each participant’s responses and to understand how those responses fit in the overall context of the full set of data. The four themes explored were relationships, support systems, balance, and motivation. Each of these themes had meaning to all of the participants.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY**

As a teacher, I have had a multitude of students over the past 15 years. Each of these students travels a unique path on his or her way to being a student in my classroom. Four years into my teaching career I encountered my first mothering teen. Teaching her had a profound impact on my professional journey. I had received training to teach special education students, ESL students, and gifted and talented students; teachers are given modifications for students with physical impairments, emotional impairments, and learning impairments. I had never received any training on teaching someone who was pregnant or mothering. This teen became the proverbial elephant in the room: She existed, she deserved to learn, but the less we spoke of her, the less we noticed her. At that point, 11 years ago, I knew that I wanted to know more. I wanted to learn about the stories of young women like her; I wanted to make sure I was an effective teacher to these women. And, as the years have passed and I have had my own children, I have more empathy and understanding of being pregnant and mothering.

Research surrounding pregnant and mothering teens is limited. Pillow (2006) noted a severe lack of data and research that tracks the education and educational experiences of pregnant and mothering students. She asserted some basic questions not addressed by research:

How many pregnant and mothering teens are in public schools? Where and how are pregnant and mothering students receiving an education? How many

pregnant and mothering students graduate? How many pregnant and mothering students return to school to receive their high school diplomas? What types of education are pregnant and mothering students receiving? Additionally, we know little about more in-depth questions: What is the purpose of education for the pregnant and mothering student? What are the educational histories and experiences of pregnant and mothering students? What are the indicators of success for pregnant and mothering students—are they graduation, economic independence, morality training, marriage, no repeat pregnancy? What educational programs for pregnant and mothering students are effective and why? Are there different educational needs for the pregnant student from the mothering student, and how can these differing needs best be addressed? What does equal education look like for pregnant and mothering students? What is a comparable education for pregnant and mothering students? What makes a placement voluntary? What is the impact and possibilities brought about by de facto single-sex education many pregnant and mothering students are receiving? (pp. 64–65)

This research sought to answer one of the questions outlined by Pillow (2006)—namely, what are the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering students? This study specifically explored the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens who were academically successful.

## **Discussion**

Through the interviews and focus group discussions, four broad themes emerged: school relationships, support systems, balance, and motivation. The first of these, school relationships, incorporated all of the people that the mothers in this study dealt with within the school, including peers, teachers, administrators, and school staff. Each of these relationships had an impact on the educational experiences of these mothering teens.

### **School Relationships**

One of the most profound things that I learned from this research was that each of the teens felt shunned by her peers. This finding stands out as a significant piece of information for this study and for future research. The teens felt alone and isolated, and they described how their peers would speak about them, both to their faces and behind their backs. The young women described it as snickering or gossiping. When they told me their stories and about their interactions with peers, their faces appeared to be full of heartbreak and abandonment; they looked alone.

Social isolation has been shown in research to contribute to at least two issues for pregnant and mothering teens. Birkeland, Thompson, and Phares (2010) noted that isolation of mothering teens contributes to postpartum depression—a serious condition for women, regardless of age. As noted by Biggs, Combellick, Arons, and Brindis (2013), social isolation can also be a barrier to education. Pregnant and mothering teens experience a wide variety of educational barriers, and their success is dependent on the ability of a school system to minimize the impact. Postpartum depression can impede a

student's journey to educational success, and social isolation serves in and of itself as an educational barrier.

Throughout the course of the interviews the teens also spoke of how teachers had positively impacted their educational experiences. Each spoke about how certain teachers would champion them on and encourage them not to quit. Some teachers were very accessible via email, and the teens valued when teachers gave them a bit of extra time if needed. Each participant focused on the positive aspects of her teachers, though in small instances they also shared some of the negative stories. Jamie described how a teacher told her in front of the entire class that a teen mom would be the last person she would take advice from—an act of abuse on the part of the teacher (Aluede, Ojugo, & Okoza, 2012). The others spoke of how teachers did not say things specifically to them, although their actions spoke volumes. The mothers were given looks and could tell if a teacher had a negative opinion of them. They also said that teachers praised other students and not the pregnant or mothering teens for the same or similar actions or accomplishments. The mothers expressed, however, that they found their teachers more helpful than harmful. Their senior teachers really encouraged them to finish; some of the mothers even had teachers who themselves had been pregnant and mothering teens, and they said that those teachers really pushed them and encouraged them.

If we are trying to increase rates at which pregnant and mothering teens complete high school, then the effect of shaming and abuse warrants further research. The words spoken to Jamie that day in class—when her teacher said “a teen mom is the last person I will take parenting advice from”—left a deep impression on her. From her reaction

while telling me about it, one could tell she would carry those words with her the rest of her life. Abuse should never be tolerated in a school setting. “In the school setting, where teaching and learning take place, the importance of children’s mental health should not be underestimated. Excessive emotional abuse from teachers can negatively affect children and may have adverse effects on their learning” (Aluede, Ojugo, & Okoza, 2012, p. 29).

While Jamie was the only participant who spoke of specific verbal abuse in the classroom, the other teens did speak of being excluded. They were regularly subject to nonverbal cues in the classroom, and said they were often given looks from teachers that made them feel like they were thought less of for being pregnant or mothering teens. They were aware of how their teachers perceived them without their teachers saying anything. Again, not all of the interactions experienced with teachers were negative, but the instances that were negative left lasting impressions.

Relationships between staff members and the pregnant and mothering teens were also explored through this research. The teens had positive experiences with school staff, including secretaries and general staff at the school who would not be considered teachers or administrators. They felt safe leaving their children with the staff members in the nursery and said that many of the secretaries were kind and often accompanied the children during fire drills. The mothers did not indicate that they had any negative or judgmental experiences with the staff at school, and the positive interactions led them to feel valued and safe.

The majority of the teens' interactions and relationships with the principal, as well as the assistant principals, associate principals, and counselors, were positive. Some of the assistant principals would inquire about their children and encourage the mothers. Several indicated that one of the assistant principals was very negative in her interactions with students, giving them "looks." Jamie said that she confronted her about how it was not "cute" to be pregnant in high school. The majority of the teens had little interaction with the assistant principals other than passing in the halls, however, due to the fact that they were not in trouble often or ever, with the exception of Jamie.

In conclusion, the interactions and relationships with a variety of people within a school had an influence on these young women. All of the teens experienced isolation, and research has shown that peer isolation can contribute to postpartum depression (Birkeland et al., 2010) and be an educational barrier (Biggs et al., 2013). The teens in this study were all extremely motivated and often indicated that they ignored others. On the other hand, if a pregnant or mothering teen is insecure or subject to influence, these interactions could greatly impact their educational experience. Thus, I explored the role of support systems.

### **Support Systems**

Valor High School supplied a wide variety of support systems, including in-school care for the children of mothering teens. The students did not have to pay for the childcare, however there had to be an available spot. Three of the teens—Jamie, Karina, and Mary—utilized this service, and all three said it was a huge factor in their ability to continue to go to school (Griffin, 1998). Moreover, transportation to and from school

was of tremendous importance to these women. And the weekend food backpacks provided important nutrition to these young mothers and their children.

In order for the women to navigate the halls while pregnant they were permitted to leave class five minutes before the bell, and also received restroom passes. Nevertheless, teachers often asked the pregnant teens if they could wait to use the restroom, in part so they would not miss information. As a teacher myself, I can appreciate teaching “bell to bell.” However, being a pregnant woman in the crowded halls in between classes is very scary and dangerous. Valor High School is almost one third of a mile long and two stories high. For a pregnant woman, this can mean a very long walk, not easily completed within the six-minute passing period.

Valor High School also provided homebound services for mothers. A teacher would come to a student’s home after she gave birth in order to keep her up to date in her classes. These services were only allowed for six weeks, however, and then the student was required to return to school. Jamie, who gave birth during the school year, indicated that this was a huge help for her. She also used email and was able to access schoolwork from the public library.

Resources available to pregnant and mothering teens outside of school, from what the teens of this study indicated, were all family-based. East and Chien (2010) found that when pregnancies were unplanned, mothers reported that family conflict increased. In keeping with this finding, the support that these teens received did not always come from their own immediate families. Indeed, all of the teens indicated that they relied heavily on their boyfriends’ families. Jamie was the only participant who

lived with her mother, though she ultimately moved in with her boyfriend's family, after which she and her boyfriend acquired their own place to live.

As described in the previous chapter, during one of the focus group meetings the teens began discussing their living arrangements. Several expressed that their boyfriends' families expected them to cook and clean for the entire family. They expressed how difficult it was to go to school, take care of their children, and cook and clean for their extended family (SmithBattle, 2007). The impact of the teens living with their boyfriends' families was not explored during this study.

### **Balance**

The teens in this study indicated that it was difficult for them to balance their time as pregnant and mothering teens. While they were at school they had to focus completely on their studies. However, there were days when they had to take their children to the doctor or other appointments, and school had to take second priority. Not surprisingly, the teens all indicated that they had to follow a schedule in order to get schoolwork done and to take care of their children. Karina, for example, indicated that she had to wait until 5:00 every evening to start doing her homework, so that she would have someone to help with her son. Likewise, many of the teens indicated that it was difficult to balance being pregnant and being in school: They did not fit into desks, they could barely walk the halls, they feared being hit in the halls, they could not hold their bladders, they were excessively tired, and their brains did not always work as well as they once had. Each of these physiological effects of being pregnant made it difficult for the young women to be at school and be pregnant. Finally, the teens also had to balance



their reactions to socially constructed views of them as pregnant and mothering teens. They were all very aware of what society thought of them, but they all indicated an indifference to that socially constructed view.

### **Motivation**

Motivation for all of the teens in this study tended to come from a similar source: their children. All indicated that they were the biggest motivation for them to finish high school on the Recommended or Distinguished program. They perceived being able to pursue an education at a university as very important for their futures. Moreover, each participant indicated she had something to prove, to show people that she could do it—be a mom and graduate on the Recommended High School or Distinguished Achievement Program. Each also indicated that she had long range plans, including specific goals for furthering her education. Some were going to college and others had plans for going to school when her schedule would allow it. Many of the teens indicated that it was not until they became pregnant that they really began to focus on their futures. Jamie said it quite nicely: “A baby can change you for good or for worse.” In short, each of the teens indicated that her baby helped to motivate her as a student.

### **Resilience Theory**

Resilience theory can be used to explain how some youth thrive when they have experienced adversity (Zimmerman et al., 2013). When youth make a positive adjustment after they have been exposed to one or more risk factors, the resilience process has occurred (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Within resilience theory, negative outcomes are more likely to develop when a teen has been exposed to a risk factors;

however, when a teen has access to promotive factors, their likelihood of resiliency increases (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010).

Promotive factors can be individual assets or resources. Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) defined assets as “positive factors that reside within the individual, such as competency, coping skills, and self-efficacy” (p. 399). Zimmerman et al. (2013) identified *assets* as factors within an individual, such as their identity, efficacy, and orientation toward the future. They identified *resources* as external factors, such as opportunity structures and adult mentors. Likewise, Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) defined resources as positive factors that are external to the person that help them to overcome risk. They could include mentoring, parental support, or community organizations. Zimmerman (2013) found that natural mentors helped to protect adolescent mothers’ mental health from the negative effects of stress. According to Hurd and Zimmerman (2010), there are two types of promotive factors: compensatory factors and protective factors. Compensatory factors contribute positively to youth outcomes, and protective factors buffer or protect youth from negative outcomes.

## **Resources**

In this study, two themes can be classified as resources. The first is school relationships. The teens in this study were all impacted by the relationships they had at school, and these positive relationships can be identified as resources. Each of the teens spoke to the teachers, staff, and administration who supported them. These people showed interest in the women and their children. Karina even requested a mentor, and this led to her having yet another resource within the school.

Support systems emerged as the second type of resource in this study. Specifically, through Valor High School's support systems, the teens had access to a variety of resources that fostered their resilience. The high school provided child care, transportation, parenting classes, counselors, a social worker, mentors, and hallway passes. Each of these resources helped foster resilience for these teens. All of the women in this study also indicated that their boyfriends' families were support systems, and thus resources. They provided them shelter and some sense of acceptance when most of their own parents' had taken a step back. Both themes of school relationships and support systems have aspects that helped to provide resources for the teens so they could successfully complete high school.

### **Assets**

Assets are intrinsic factors that come from within the individual. The two assets identified in this research are balance and motivation. The women in this research identified the need to find balance within their lives. Some had to wait for their boyfriends or family members to come home in order to find time for homework. The teens had similar schedules so that they could take care of their children and complete their schoolwork. They also said they needed to categorize or compartmentalize their daily lives so they could focus on their many tasks. While they were at school, they needed to focus on school, and the women said they sometimes had to choose between this and their children. For instance, if a child was sick, the mother had to focus on her child. Being able to find balance in their daily lives was an asset, an intrinsic factor that positively motivated them.

According to Fergus and Zimmerman (2005), the theme of motivation would need to be an intrinsic characteristic that promotes resilience in order to be considered an asset. Throughout this research the teens spoke of their motivation, and it was the driving force for all of these mothers. Every one of the teens identified her child (or children) as her motivation. Put another way, their drive to be good mothers—and to be people their children could respect and look up to—motivated them. These teens all wanted their children to be proud of them; they wanted to succeed so they would be seen as good mothers, not failures, not “another pregnant or mothering teen.” This intrinsic need fueled them to complete high school and to prepare for college.

### **Fostering Resilience**

Resilience theory looks at risk exposure among adolescents and how they avoid negative outcomes (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Every research participant in this study had been exposed to risk by virtue of being a pregnant and mothering teen. Every teen in this study avoided negative outcomes due to her resilience. They all had assets and resources that aided in their ability to successfully complete high school. Schools can control the resources that are made available to pregnant and mothering teens; assets are harder for schools to control. We can, however, foster systems that intrinsically motivate our pregnant and mothering teens.

As demonstrated by Valor High School, school systems have the ability to provide resources to pregnant and mothering teens that foster resilience. However, most of the extant research on pregnant and mothering teens focuses strongly on preventing pregnancy and the resources needed within schools to do so. Thus, research on teen

pregnancy and resilience is scant. What does exist does not explore the assets necessary in order for teen mothers to be resilient. Specifically, scholars have not addressed mothering as an asset that promotes resilience in teen mothers.

This study adds to the current body of research on pregnant and mothering teens by exploring the role of mothering as an asset to educational success. Mothering is a nurturing and protective role for many women. The teens in this study viewed mothering as a priority and spoke of how they were examples for their children. They wanted their children to learn from their mistakes and successes, and for their children to look up to them and believe their mothers were strong, smart, and driven. They wanted to be able to provide for and take care of their children. They all believed their education was integral to being able to accomplish these things. Therefore, the teens in this study found their common asset to be mothering, as it provided them with the drive to finish school. It was the foremost asset that fostered their resilience, their driving force. Each participant was equipped with different assets or intrinsic motivators; however, they all shared mothering as an asset. While becoming a mother in high school is not ideal, the very fact that these teens were mothers provided them an important asset for being resilient. When faced with the risk factor of being a pregnant or mothering teen mothering promoted their ability to be resilient and successfully graduate from high school.

The teens in this study were not allowed to fail, to give up, to give in, because their role as mother would not allow them to. Each time the young women were asked, Why did you keep going? Why did you stay on the more rigorous plan? What was your

motivation? the answer was always the same: “For my child.” I could see them envisioning themselves speaking with their children later in life. They wanted their children to be proud of them, to see their strength, their resolve, and their resiliency. They wanted their children to know that they were not burdens; they were the fire that drove these mothers. Unfortunately, the research on pregnant and mothering teens to date has failed to address the power of motherhood as a motivating factor.

One notable exception can be found in a study by Carey, Raliff, and Lyle (1998), who studied resilience in successful adolescent mothers. They identified key resiliencies, including insight, initiative, relationships, and responsibility/rebellion (i.e., the need to prove society wrong). For the teens in the current study, the need to be a good mother and a good example was the prevailing force. Thus, I situate the need to prove society wrong and the drive to succeed within motherhood, rather than rebellion. Of course, these teen mothers did not want to be socially constructed teen moms (Musick, 1993); more importantly, they wanted to be good moms. They wanted to be able to tell their children that they graduated on a more rigorous plan, they went to college, and they did all of this while mothering. The teens reflected on how they would one day tell their children about their life journeys—as if one day they would be able to look back on their experiences and tell their children, “I did this, I graduated, I was successful, and I did it for you.” Indeed, all of the themes found that emerged in this study are tied together by motherhood.

The resiliency that these teens derived from their role as mother is the most salient finding from this research. This finding is contradictory to our current thought

process of teen pregnancy and motherhood as an impediment—an automatic sentence not to finish high school. Yes, the participants found being pregnant and mothering teens to be a less than ideal way to complete high school. In the end, however, the fact that they were mothers drove them to complete school, not to drop out.

### **Implications for Practice**

#### **Bullying Prevention**

One of the most significant findings from this study relates to the isolation of pregnant and mothering teens from their peers. The teens were often pointed at, talked about, and humiliated by other students. Thus, teachers, administrators, and school staff need to be educated to be aware of these scenarios. They need to watch for this type of isolation, and promote inclusive peer interactions. Trainings for faculty and staff about working with pregnant and mothering teens would be a small step in building relationships between peers and limiting bullying.

All schools have an obligation to ensure a positive learning environment for their students. Goldstein (2012) said that it is the school's responsibility to promote awareness of acceptable behavior and to educate staff. The staff must have a clearly defined role in protecting students and disciplining those who are not behaving in an acceptable manner. Thus, all schools need to actively work to eliminate any bullying within their walls. By providing staff development that addresses bullying and specifically includes pregnant and mothering teens, all students within the learning environment should benefit.

## **Support Groups**

The teens in this study appreciated the ability to get together in a small group and discuss pertinent issues. Weed, Kough, and Borkowski (2000) stated that providing support where teens can emotionally share is an essential intervention for pregnant and mothering teens' resilience. During the focus group meetings, the teens felt safe, and they felt like they had a voice; this was different from how they felt at school. They did not know each other prior to the study; they had similar life experiences and yet were unaware that there were others like them within their own school. The isolation they felt from the majority of their peers arguably could have been minimized if they had been able to find a peer group with similar life experiences. Support groups could provide pregnant and mothering teens that are in similar life circumstances a place to talk and belong.

A range of support groups would be helpful. A college readiness support group geared towards pregnant and mothering teens could help them apply for colleges and loans, or focus on completing high school. The focus on something other than being a pregnant or mothering teen could create a space where they might eventually feel safe enough and comfortable enough to discuss their stories and help each other out. Having a group focused on graduation requirements would allow pregnant and mothering teens to gather information about required and desirable classes. The groups could be facilitated by a teacher, counselor, or staff member who could also help ascertain and secure resources that the pregnant and mothering teens might need. The group leader



could also serve as a voice and advocate for the pregnant and mothering teens to administration, teachers, and staff.

### **Mentorship and Empathy**

Karina valued having a mentor before and after her pregnancy, and she believed other teens would also value having a mentor. An empathetic parental attitude, if used by an adult as a mentor to a pregnant or mothering teen, can foster resiliency (Weed, Keogh, & Borkowski, 2000; Buzi et al., 2015). At Valor High School there were several teachers who had also been pregnant and mothering teens themselves. Their firsthand knowledge could be helpful and they could make excellent mentors. This is not to exclude the capabilities of other teachers to mentor these teens, but the leader of such a support group should be able to relate to the group teens as much as possible.

Teachers would benefit from learning how to encourage and provide empathy to pregnant and mothering students (Weed, Keogh, & Borkowski, 2000). Education for teachers about the physiological needs of pregnant and mothering teens would help them understand, for example, the bladder constraints of a pregnant individual. Teachers need be aware of what is happening in their classrooms and in their hallways. Understanding the many different situations their students are dealing with can help teachers be better educators and fosters their students' abilities to learn. Pregnant and mothering teens do not want to stand out in class or be seen as the "other." With that in mind, specific trainings about what is physically safe in a classroom or lab environment would be extremely helpful. Teachers, staff, and administrators also need to be aware of the impact of their words, and this could be fostered through sensitivity training or

awareness training. They should receive training on how to speak and interact with all students, including pregnant and mothering teens.

### **Accessibility**

The teens in this study pointed out how important it was to be able to access their teachers while away from school. Students who are pregnant or mothering need flexible learning situations that allow them to engage in learning from their homes. Students are very skilled at using the internet and email; teachers should use that to their advantage. Being more flexible in instructional strategies helps all students, not just pregnant and mothering teens.

The teens in this study attended a high school that afforded them many different resources. These resources were a result of the policies and procedures outlined by the school district, and not all pregnant and mothering teens have access to these same resources. Weed, Kough, and Borkowski (2000) called for an environment that encourages and provides supports to allow adolescent mothers to finish their education. Thus, the next section of this chapter will explore these and other policies that could positively impact the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens.

### **Implications for Policy**

Valor High School had a wide variety of policies—all set by the school district, rather than the state or federal government—that yielded resources for pregnant and mothering teens, including baby buses, in-school childcare, parenting classes, child development classes, and a dedicated counselor. Each helped the teens in this study to successfully graduate from high school. Without these policies and procedures, the

outcomes for many of these girls may have been different. For example, Karina, Mary, and Jamie said they would not have been able to finish high school at all without resources such as baby buses and childcare.

I observed teachers, administrators, and community members say that having a daycare in the school makes it easy for students to have children while in high school. This belief that daycare in a high school promotes teen pregnancy is a common belief (East, Loin, Horn, Trinh, & Reyes, 2009). None of the teens in this study chose to get pregnant. They made decisions that led to them getting pregnant, but none of them actively sought it out. Moreover, the teens' comments during the interviews and focus groups indicated that they did not believe that having childcare in the school made having a baby while in high school easy or glamorous. However, as I describe below, it is an area that needs more research.

Policies that help pregnant and mothering teens graduate are valuable. Our goal as educators is to have successful high school graduates. We strive as educators to make the lives of our students better. By ensuring the educational opportunities of our pregnant and mothering teens, we are fulfilling our goal of ensuring all students perform to their potential. Schools need to assess their policies surrounding pregnant and mothering teens in order to determine what best meets the needs of the students. Every student needs an advocate; every student should have a voice.

### **Implications for Educational Leadership**

The advocates for these pregnant and mothering teens with the ability to change policy and practice are the educational leaders involved in the K-12 system. Educational

leaders are responsible for implementing bullying prevention programs in schools, organizing support groups, developing mentorship programs, promoting empathy with school staff, and providing accessibility to teachers to pregnant and mothering teens. The leaders in schools and at the school district level have the ability to change and create policies and programs that foster resilient pregnant and mothering teens. School leaders have the ability to bring programs to schools such as baby buses, in-school child care, teacher web sites, teacher email accounts, designated counselors, and mentors. It is the responsibility of educational leaders to ensure a quality education for all students, including pregnant and mothering teens.

### **Implications for Further Research**

This research study on the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens who graduated from high school on the Recommended High School and Distinguished Achievement Programs has brought to light to several different topics that need to be further explored through research. The first and very critical piece is the impact of isolation on pregnant and mothering teens. The second area needing further research is the impact of living arrangements on these students. Third, we need to know more about the college plans and continuation rates for pregnant and mothering teens who graduate on plans such as the Recommended and Distinguished programs. There are also several topics that involve the effectiveness of different school-related programs aimed at helping pregnant and mothering teens graduate. More work in each of these areas will greatly enhance the body of knowledge on pregnant and mothering teens.

## **Isolation**

Each pregnant and mothering teen involved in the current project spoke about the isolation she experienced while pregnant. Lynn, for example, felt “like she should wear a ‘scarlet A.’” They spoke of how they lost friends and became very isolated; they described the jeers, snickers, and comments made by their peers in the educational environment. Bullying is a hot topic with school age children and can lead to adverse effects. Likewise, female bullying is different than male bullying (Catanzaro, 2011). If isolation and bullying are related to dropout rates among pregnant and mothering teens, then intervention strategies should be devised and put into place. Each of these teens was very determined, but what happens when a woman who is not as determined is faced with isolation and bullying within her educational environment?

With this in mind, it is critical to study how isolation and bullying affect the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens. Further research on the impact of isolation from peers would be valuable to assess the factors that contribute to the retention of pregnant and mothering teens. Although the interactions and relationships between the staff and the pregnant and mothering teens seemed to play a less significant role, the interactions between teachers and/or the administration and the pregnant and mothering teens could be a significant factor in their completion rates, and this should also be explored in future studies.

## **Living Arrangements**

We must also learn more about the effects of living arrangements on the education of pregnant and mothering teens. The teens in this study all lived with (or had

lived with) their boyfriends' families. During the focus group, they spoke about how this was not always easy, in large part because they were expected to cook and clean for the entire family. Moreover, the boyfriends' families were largely interested in their sons' wellbeing, and not the wellbeing of the pregnant and mothering teens. Pregnant and mothering teens are isolated from their peers, and in situations like this they also become isolated from their families. Young mothers who lived with their family of origin for the first several years of child rearing had positive effects (Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, & Paikoff, 1992). Further research is necessary to determine if living with a boyfriend's family is specific to these teens or the norm for pregnant and mothering teens. If it is the norm, how does this affect their educational experience?

### **College Planning and Persistence**

It would also be valuable to assess the college plans and continuation rates for pregnant and mothering teens. The length of this study allowed me to follow the teens for an entire year. I found that many of them had plans for college, but those plans did not necessarily work out. Karina, who graduated in the top 10% of her class, went to a pharmacy tech school, not a college or university. Mary had yet to start at a college or university. Jessica sat out an entire semester and then started at a community college. Jamie graduated shortly after the completion of the study. Lynn elected to take online classes through the University of Phoenix so that she could work and take care of her son. Each of the teens had plans to go to a college or university but those plans changed significantly for three of them. Further research is necessary to determine if resources or

help are needed beyond high school in order to ensure pregnant and mothering teens are ultimately able to pursue college or university degrees.

### **Evaluation of Supports**

We also need to understand whether or not the programs that high schools have to help pregnant and mothering teens graduate actually work. As a researcher with professional connections at Valor High School, I still could not be given any data on how many students were pregnant or mothering teens. There were no records of completion rates, and with the exception of a binder with handwritten information about pregnant and mothering teens, there were no other records kept. No one could tell me if the baby bus program was helpful or effective; no one knows if it helps to have daycare available to students who are mothers. The study participants said that all of these things were extremely valuable, but no formal records are kept on how these resources are utilized and help students. Moreover, no formal records are kept on the students themselves. If a school is not tracking whether or not the pregnant and mothering teens are completing high school, how could we possibly know if the programs that are put in place to help them are actually working?

These four areas for further research will substantially expand the literature on pregnant and mothering teens. The educational experiences of this special group of students comprise a wealth of new information waiting to be discovered. Hopefully, this study has provided a useful first step toward deeper understanding, by providing a peek into the lives of pregnant and mothering teens who graduate on rigorous degree plans and are college bound.

## **Reflections and Conclusion**

As a teacher, I felt like a failure for never noticing pregnant students being shunned in my own classroom. I knew that teachers and staff shunned the students; I had seen that. But I had never noticed the isolation, looks, snickering, and jeering. Once the first participant pointed it out, I began to look for it in the school. Sure enough, I instantly found students pointing out pregnant students and whispering. Since the conclusion of the study, I have had other pregnant students in class and I see them withdraw from their peers. I make a point to speak to them every day and ask about their kids. I group them with other students who will interact with them. I watch for shunning and, if I see it, I address it immediately. As a teacher, it is my goal to make sure all of my students feel welcome and safe within the classroom; therefore, if anyone is being excluded, shunned, or bullied, I immediately act to remedy the situation. I am grateful that I learned to look for this in my classroom.

This study on the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens who graduate on the Recommended and Distinguished plans has opened my eyes as both an educator and a researcher. Pregnant and mothering teens have an exceptionally difficult road to graduation. They are scared and alone, often cast out by their peers and their parents. They are often cast aside by the fathers of their children. They may find themselves in a very scary scenario with little or no support. If the goal of educators is to help all students finish high school, then pregnant and mothering teens deserve the highest quality education as well.



Pregnant and mothering teens will not receive the highest quality of education until we know more about what helps them to graduate from high school. This study merely scratches the surface of the experiences of a small group of pregnant and mothering teens. Each of these young women has her own unique story, though there are similarities and congruencies among them. Perhaps if we can find patterns in the factors that help to foster the education of pregnant and mothering teens, our educational institutions can better serve them.

Valor High School should be commended for the programs they have in place to help pregnant and mothering teens. While these programs are in place for all of the high schools within this district, they are not necessarily in place for districts in the surrounding area, the state, or the nation. Even with all of the programs in place for pregnant and mothering teens at Valor High School, they are an almost invisible population, evidenced at least in part by the fact that there are no ascertainable records.

Pregnant and mothering teens deserve a chance to be heard. Hopefully, this research has given these five teens their voice. I hope the readers of this research develop a better understanding about the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens. Teen mothers are not all dropouts; they are not bad mothers. They have goals, dreams, and aspirations, just like their peers. These teens had goals to go to college and they took rigorous courses to get there. Pregnant and mothering teens can graduate on rigorous high school plans and in the top 10% of their class. Pregnant and mothering teens pursue college and university educations. Pregnant and mothering teens

are intelligent, motivated, and strong women who deserve the best education we can offer.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**IRB APPROVAL 2013**

DIVISION OF RESEARCH  
Office of Research Compliance and Biosafety  
750 Agronomy Road, Suite 27011186  
TAMU  
College Station, TX 77843-1186  
Tel. 979.458.1467  
Fax. 979.862.3176  
<http://rcb.tamu.edu>

APPROVAL DATE: 03/13/2013

MEMORANDUM TO: Kathryn Mckenzie

FROM: Dr. James Fluckey, Chair, Institutional Review Board

SUBJECT: Submission Response for Initial Review Submission Form Approval

Protocol Number: IRB2013-0077  
Title: A Qualitative Study of the Educational Experiences of Pregnant and Mothering  
Teens  
Review Type: Expedite  
Approved: 03/13/2013  
Continuing Review Due: 01/28/2014  
Expiration Date: 02/28/2014

Review Categories and Regulatory Determinations:  
Category 6: Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for  
research purposes  
Category 7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but  
not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language,  
communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing  
survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors  
evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Documents Reviewed and Approved:  
IRB Application; Informed Consent, Parental Permission; Interview and Focus Group  
Questions; Cypress Fairbanks ISD Permission

Document of Consent: Written consent in accordance with 45 CF 46.116/ 21 CFR 50.27

This research project has been approved. As principal investigator, you assume the following responsibilities:

1. Continuing Review: The protocol must be renewed by the expiration date in order to continue with the research project. A Continuing Review application along with required documents must be submitted by the continuing review deadline. Failure to do so may result in processing delays, study termination, and/or loss of funding.
2. Completion Report: Upon completion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a Completion Report must be submitted to the IRB.
3. Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events: Unanticipated problems and adverse events must be reported to the IRB immediately.
4. Reports of Potential Non-compliance: Potential non-compliance, including deviations from protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. Amendments: Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an Amendment to the IRB for review. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented.
6. Consent Forms: When using a consent form or information sheet, you must use the IRB stamped approved version. Please log into iRIS to download your stamped approved version of the consenting instruments. If you are unable to locate the stamped version in iRIS, please contact the office.
7. Audit: Your protocol may be subject to audit by the Human Subjects Post Approval Monitor. During the life of the study please review and document study progress using the PI self-assessment found on the RCB website as a method of preparation for the potential audit. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate study records and making them available for inspection. Investigators are encouraged to request a pre-initiation site visit with the Post Approval Monitor. These visits are designed to help ensure that all necessary documents are approved and in order prior to initiating the study and to help investigators maintain compliance.
8. Recruitment: All approved recruitment materials will be stamped electronically by the HSPP staff and available for download from iRIS. These IRB-stamped approved documents from iRIS must be used for recruitment. For materials that are distributed to potential participants electronically and for which you can only feasibly use the approved text rather than the stamped document, the study's IRB Protocol number, approval date, and expiration dates must be included in the following format:

TAMU IRB#20XX-XXXX Approved: XX/XX/XXXX Expiration Date:  
XX/XX/XXXX.

This electronic document provides notification of the review results by the Institutional Review Board.

## APPENDIX B

### APPROVAL LETTER FROM SCHOOL DISTRICT

\_\_\_\_\_ Independent School District

Department of School Improvement and Accountability

\_\_\_\_\_, Ed.D. Assistant Superintendent

To: Karee Gregg

From: \_\_\_\_\_, Ed.D. Date: February 14, 2013

Re: Approval of Application to Conduct Research in \_\_\_\_\_ ISD

Your request to conduct the following research project in \_\_\_\_\_ ISD has been approved: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Pregnant and Mothering Teens.

As you pursue this project, please refer to the conditions listed below:

- Keep \_\_\_\_\_, Principal of Valor High School, informed of all activities involved with the project.
- \_\_\_\_\_, lead counselor, will serve as your research sponsor.
- Work with your research sponsor to identify participants for this study. The research sponsor will then send out and receive the consent forms. She may provide you with the forms of those individuals whose parents have provided consent.
- You may only contact potential participants once.
- Practice confidentiality while conducting the various steps necessary to complete the project.
- Use a random code system to record data collected. Never use names or ID numbers.
- Use a pseudonym instead of the district or campus name in your research.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

#### **Consent to Participate and Parental Permission**

##### **Title of Research Study**

A Qualitative Study of the Educational Experiences of Pregnant and Mothering Teens

##### **Principal Investigator**

Karee Gregg—doctoral student, Texas A&M University

##### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research and to record the consent of those who agree to be involved in the study.

You have been asked to participate in a research study about the educational experiences of pregnant and mothering teens. The purpose of the study is to give a voice to pregnant and mothering teens with regards to their educational experience.

You were selected to be a possible participant because you are or were a pregnant or mothering teen over the age of 18 who will be graduating on the Recommended plan or you have previously graduated on the Recommended plan.

##### **What you will be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two semi-structured individual interviews and two focus group meetings.

Your participation will be audiorecorded and transcribed. It is not mandatory to have the interview audiotaped; if you do not wish to have your interview audiotaped the researcher will take manual notes of your interview and answers.

##### **What risks are involved in this study?**

The risks associated with this study are minimal and are not greater than the informants feeling uncomfortable as they discuss their experience of being a pregnant or mothering teen.



**What are the possible benefits of this study?**

Informants will not receive any direct, tangible benefits from participating in the study. However, potential benefits to the educational field are: discovery of best practices, programs that motivate, encourage, and support pregnant and mothering teens in their ability to complete high school on the Recommended plan.

**Do I have to participate?**

No. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University being affected.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of aliases. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Karee Gregg, the researcher, will have access to the records and data.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audiorecorded. Any audiorecording will be stored securely and only Karee Gregg, the researcher, will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for one year and then erased or destroyed.

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have question regarding this study, you may contact Karee Gregg at (xxx) xxx-xxxx, or via email at xxxxx.

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research related problems or questions regarding your rights as a participant, you can contact the IRB office at (979) 458-4067 or [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu).

**Participation**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. If you would like to be in the study, please sign in the spaces provided for participants.

Name and signature of person who explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature and Printed Name of Person who Obtained Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks. You have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. Your signature on this page indicates that you understand what you are being asked to do, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks. You have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. Your signature indicates that you are giving permission to your daughter or legal ward to participate in this research study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any legal rights.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX D**  
**IRB APPROVAL 2014**

DIVISION OF RESEARCH  
Research Compliance and Biosafety  
750 Agronomy Road, Suite 270 1186 TAMU  
College Station, TX 77843-1186  
Tel. 979.458.1467  
Fax. 979.862.3176  
<http://rcb.tamu.edu>

DATE: February 26, 2014

MEMORANDUM TO: Kathryn McKenzie

FROM: Human Subjects Protection Program Institutional Review Board

SUBJECT: Expedited Approval

Study Number: IRB20XX-XXXX  
Title: A Qualitative Study of the Educational Experiences of Pregnant and Mothering  
Teens  
Approval Date: 03/13/2013  
Continuing Review Due: 01/15/2015  
Expiration Date: 02/15/2015  
Documents Reviewed and Approved: Document of Consent: Written consent in  
accordance with 45 CF 46.116/ 21 CFR 50.27  
Waiver of Consent:  
Provisions:

Comments: 5 of 10 enrolled. No new enrollment, following subjects. No adverse events  
or unanticipated problems. This research project has been approved. As principal  
investigator, you assume the following responsibilities:

1. Continuing Review: The protocol must be renewed by the expiration date in order to  
continue with the research project. A Continuing Review application along with  
required documents must be submitted by the continuing review deadline. Failure to do  
so may result in processing delays, study termination, and/or loss of funding.
2. Completion Report: Upon completion of the research project (including data analysis  
and final written papers), a Completion Report must be submitted to the IRB.

3. Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events: Unanticipated problems and adverse events must be reported to the IRB immediately.
4. Reports of Potential Non-compliance: Potential non-compliance, including deviations from protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. Amendments: Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an Amendment to the IRB for review. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented.
6. Consent Forms: When using a consent form or information sheet, you must use the IRB stamped approved version. Please log into iRIS to download your stamped approved version of the consenting instruments. If you are unable to locate the stamped version in iRIS, please contact the office.
7. Audit: Your protocol may be subject to audit by the Human Subjects Post Approval Monitor. During the life of the study please review and document study progress using the PI self-assessment found on the RCB website as a method of preparation for the potential audit. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate study records and making them available for inspection. Investigators are encouraged to request a pre-initiation site visit with the Post Approval Monitor. These visits are designed to help ensure that all necessary documents are approved and in order prior to initiating the study and to help investigators maintain compliance.
8. Recruitment: All approved recruitment materials will be stamped electronically by the HSPP staff and available for download from iRIS. These IRB-stamped approved documents from iRIS must be used for recruitment. For materials that are distributed to potential participants electronically and for which you can only feasibly use the approved text rather than the stamped document, the study's IRB Protocol number, approval date, and expiration dates must be included in the following format:

TAMU IRB#20XX-XXXX Approved: XX/XX/XXXX Expiration Date: XX/XX/XXXX.

1. FERPA and PPRA: Investigators conducting research with students must have appropriate approvals from the FERPA administrator at the institution where the research will be conducted in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) protects the rights of parents in students ensuring that written parental consent is required for participation in surveys, analysis, or evaluation that ask questions falling into categories of protected information.

2. Food: Any use of food in the conduct of human subjects research must follow Texas A&M University Standard Administrative Procedure 24.01.01.M4.02.

3. Payments: Any use of payments to human subjects must follow Texas A&M University Standard Administrative Procedure 21.01.99.M0.03.

This electronic document provides notification of the review results by the Institutional Review Board.

**APPENDIX E**  
**INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

**A Qualitative Study of the Educational Experiences  
of Pregnant and Mothering Teens**

**Semi-structured Interview Questions and Guide**

- Is there something that your teachers could do to help you be successful?
- Have any teachers or school staff done things to help you out?
- Is it hard to balance being a mom and going to school?
- Is it hard to balance going to school and being pregnant?
- How do you balance going to school and being a mom?
- How do you balance going to school and being pregnant?
- What do you wish your teachers knew about you or your experience?
- Some in society believe that pregnant and mothering teens drop out. What makes you different?
- How does that society viewpoint make you feel?
- Do you think that your teachers think you should drop out?
- Do you think your teachers have an opinion about you being a pregnant or mothering teen?
- Do you think the school staff has an opinion about you being a pregnant or mothering teen?
- Do you think their opinion affects how you are taught?

- What is the hardest part of being in school and mothering/being pregnant?
- What do you wish society knew about pregnant and mothering teens?
- Are there things that your school could do to help you graduate, be successful?
- Are there things that your teachers could do to help you graduate, be successful?
- How do you cope?
- Have your school plans changed since becoming pregnant/mothering?
- Did your school plans change?
- What are your college plans?
- Have your college plans changed?
- Are there systems or structures that are helping you stay in school?
- Do you feel your teachers treat you differently?
- Is it hard to be a pregnant/mothering teen in high school? Why or why not?
- Do your peers treat you differently?
- Are you proud of yourself for finishing school?
- What is your motivation for finishing school?
- Why are you finishing school on the Recommended plan?
- Have you thought about dropping out?
- What keeps you going to school?
- Have you thought about going to the Minimum graduation plan?
- Will you switch?
- Who has been the biggest influence on you finishing school? (you, school, parents, teachers)

- Do your parents help you?
- Have your parents pushed you to finish?
- What questions do you think would be valuable for this research?
- Are there questions I haven't asked that you think I should ask?

IRB NUMBER: IRB2013-0077 IRB APPROVAL DATE: 03/13/2013